New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

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1948 PRODUCTIONS

Premiers in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1947 Vol.

Stage Play	Page
Allegro	300
Angel in the Wings	238
Antony and Cleopatra	255
Brigadoon	427
Command Decision	328
Cradle Will Rock (The)	229
Crime and Punishment	233
Finian's Rainbow	486
For Love or Money	271
Heiress (The)	335
*High Button Shoes	304
Inspector Calls (An)	291
John Loves Mary	465
Man and Superman	308
Medea	295
Mikado (The)	222
Music In My Heart	324
*Streetcar Named Desire (A)	249
Winslow Boy (The)	283
Young Man's Fancy (A)	383

•

1946 Vol.

*Annie Get Your Gun	382
*Born Yesterday	466
Burlesque	208
Call Me Mister	403
Happy Birthday	280

•

1944 Vol.

*Harvey	95

•

1943 Vol.

Oklahoma	341
Voice of the Turtle (The)	199

•

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of January 1, 1949

1948 PRODUCTIONS

Premiers During 1948

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	Page
*Anne of the Thousand Days	128
*As the Girls Go	159
Bravo	165
Cox and Box	378
Cup of Trembling (The)	288
Doctor Social	348
*Don't Listen, Ladies	100
*Edward, My Son	214
For Heaven's Sake, Mother!	156
Ghosts	343
Gondoliers (The)	371
*Goodbye, My Fancy	152
Grandma's Diary	228
H.M.S. Pinafore	378
Hallams (The)	313
Harvest of Years	394
Heaven on Earth	240
Hedda Gabler	327
Hilarities	250
Hold It!	274
*Inside U.S.A.	279
Iolanthe	397
*Jenny Kissed Me	112
John Bull's Other Island	351
Joy to the World	303
Kathleen	358
*Kiss Me, Kate	91
Last Dance (The)	367
Leading Lady (The)	190
*Lend an Ear	122
*Life With Mother	182
*Light Up the Sky	148
Linden Tree (The)	317
Look, Ma, I'm Dancin'!	364
*Love Life	201
Macbeth	297
*Madwoman of Chaillot (The)	104
Magdalena	235
*Make Mine Manhattan	382
*Make Way for Lucia	115
Me and Molly	322
Men We Marry (The)	379
Minnie and Mr. Williams	177
*Mister Roberts	338
*My Romance	186
*Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!	108
Old Lady Says "No!" (The)	342
Patience	355
Pirates of Penzance	399
Play's the Thing (The)	283
Power Without Glory	390
*Private Lives	209
*Rape of Lucretia (The)	95
Rats of Norway (The)	292
*Red Gloves	132
Sally	271
Seeds in the Wind	262
Set My People Free	171
*Silver Whistle (The)	139
Sleepy Hollow	258
*Small Wonder	244
Story for Strangers (A)	231
Strange Bedfellows	386
*Summer and Smoke	205
Sundown Beach	253
Survivors (The)	374
Time for Elizabeth	218
Tonight at 8:30	329, 334
Town House	224
Trial by Jury	399
Vigil (The)	265
Where Stars Walk	326
*Where's Charley?	197
Yeomen of the Guard (The)	361
You Never Can Tell	307
*Young and Fair (The)	143
CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD	296

1948 CAST INDEX

Authors	89	Managers or Producers	89
Cast	85	Scenic Designers	90
Dance Directors	90	Stage Directors	90
Composers, Lyric Writers, Librettists			90

Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of January 1, 1949

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN — NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
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New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews

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A Valuable and Authoritative Record of the Contemporary Theatre

Cast Index

Listed alphabetically are the names of actors and actresses in shows opening during the year 1948. The number opposite the name indicates the pages on which each is found in NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS. We regret that we cannot include the various cast changes, but can only give the opening night casts as published in the New York newspapers.

PAGE

A

Abbott, Dancers (The) 250
Abbott, Philip 394
Adair, Yvonne 122
Adams, Gail 186
Addy, Wesley 190
Alberg, Somer 171
Alden, Bonnie 112
Alexander, Katherine 218
Alexander, Rod 279
Alexander, Ronald 148, 348
Allen, Joseph, Jr. 379
Allister, Claud 283
Altman, Frieda 143, 386
Amos, Ruth 386
Amsterdam, Morey 250
Anders, Glenn 148
Anderson, Anne Renee 122
Anderson, David 379
Anderson, Paul 177
Anderson, Terence 128
Anderson, Thomas 171
Andre, Jacqueline 156
Andrews, Nancy 250
Andrews, Tod 205
Antoine, Robert 182
Appler, Walter F. 303
Aprea, Andy 186
Arbury, Guy 374
Archer, Cheryl 201
Archer, John 386
Arnold, Richard 382
Arthur, John 218
Ashcroft, Peggy 214
Atherton, U. T. 288
Atuka-Reid, Edith 171
Austen, Gerald 250
Avedon, Doe 143
Avera, Tom 253

B

Babbs, Dorothy 122
Bagley, Eleanor 382
Baines, Robert 338
Balsam, Martin 253, 297
Bankhead, Tallulah 209
Bard, Katharine 313
Barker, Margaret 190
Barrs, Norman 326, 351
Barto, Betty Lou 159
Barton, Fred 338
Basehart, Richard 374
Bate, Tom 186
Bauer, Vivian 95
Bavier, Frances 112
Baxley, Barbara 209
Baxter, Alan 112, 313
Baxter, Lee 265
Bayfield, St. Clair 156
Bayne, Beverly 288
Beal, Royal 132, 313
Beattie, Dorothy 214
Behan, John 104
Bentley, Herschel 156
Berg, Gertrude 322
Berghof, Herbert 327, 343
Bergner, Elisabeth 288
Bernard, Bob 274
Bernard, Dorothy 182
Bernie, Dick 240
Berrian, William 186
Bettis, Valerie 279
Bevans, Philippa 394
Binns, Edward 253
Bird, Dorothy 258
Bliss, Leila 218
Blumstein, Bessie Samose 322
Bogues, Betsy 342
Boland, Joseph 152
Bolden, Harry 171
Bolger, Ray 197
Bolger, Robert 288
Bolster, Anita 358
Bolton, Kathleen 128
Bond, Sheila 382
Bonime, Abby 262
Bonnell, Sam 303
Bonynge, Leta 386
Booth, Shirley 152, 379
Bosan, Alonzo 171
Bouchard, Patricia 143
Boule, John 171
Bourneuf, Philip 367
Bowman, Tom 274
Boyar, Monica 205
Boyer, Charles 132
Boyer, Patricia 186
Boseman, Beverlee 279
Bradford, Elaine 143
Bradley, Marion 186
Braggiotti, Stiano 156
Brando, Jocelyn 338
Brandt, Frances 139
Breaux, Marc 91
Brennan, Denis 326, 342, 351
Briggs, Harlan 218
Briggs, Matt 313
Bromley, Sheila 218
Brock, Faith 307
Brocks, Lawrence 186
Brophy, John 159
Brown, Harris 303
Brown, Reed, Jr. 224
Brown, Samuel 171
Bruce, Edwin M. 374
Brusher, Betty 235
Bruskin, Perry 382
Buchanan, Jack 100
Buckley, Kay 271
Buffett, Kenny 274
Bunker, Ralph 152
Burke, David 262, 322
Burns, David 240, 382
Burns, Nat 186
Burroughs, Eric 171
Burton, Sarah 329, 334
Butterworth, Walter 258
Buttons, "Red" 274
Byrn, Robert 201
Byron, Brooke 190

C

Caesar, Sid 382
Calder, King 165
Calgary, Andre 250
Calgary, Steve 250
Calhern, Louis 283, 374
Callahan, Bill 159
Calvin, Henry 271
Cameron, Kathryn 271
Campbell, Dean 364
Campbell, John 338
Carlisle, Kitty 95
Carlson, Vicki 143
Carnovsky, Morris 303
Carpenter, Tyler 171
Carr, Lester 322
Carradine, John 104, 190, 288
Carroll, Leo G. 112, 307
Carroll, Madeleine 152
Carroll, Nancy 156
Carroll, Penny 274
Carroll, Robert 139
Carson, Jean 165
Cassel, Arthur 322
Cassel, Sid 205
Cassidy, Jack 244
Castello, John 91
Cavanaugh, Hobart 159
Celada, Raul 364
Chambers, William 104
Chandler, Douglas 274
Channing, Carol 122
Chappel, Ed 382
Checco, Al 122
Christie, Audrey 148
Cirker, Ira 253
Citro, Michael 262
Clark, Bobby 159
Clark, Edward 218
Clark, Harry 91
Clarke, Victor 201
Clarke-Smith, D.A. 214
Clay, Edwin 91
Clement, Clay 303
Cliff, Oliver 165
Clovelly, Cecil 128
Colby, Charles 156
Collins, Russell 297, 374
Colman, Booth 329, 334
Comegys, Kathleen 139
Compton, Francis 132, 283
Condos, Steve 240
Connor, Whitfield 297, 358
Conroy, Frank 165
Cook, Donald 209
Cooper, Horace 197
Copeland, Joan 253
Coral, Tito 186
Cordell, Cathleen 317
Cordner, Blaine 171
Corey, Irwin 240
Cossart, Ernest 283
Cossart, Valerie 329, 334
Cotton, Fred Ayres 128
Cotton, George 165, 231
Courtleigh, Stephen 297
Cowles, Chandler 244
Craven, Robin 386
Crawley, Robert 394
Crocker, Donald 186
Crombie, Laura 371
Cromwell, John 297
Cronyn, Hume 374
Cullimore, Gwyneth 355, 361, 371, 397, 399
Cummings, Vicki 108
Curtsinger, Gene 235
Curven, Sonny 297
Cutting, Blair 297

D

Dale, Esther 394
Dale, Lenn 201
Dale, Margaret 224
Dall, John 132
Dalton, Doris 379
Dalzell, William 342
Dana, Dick 159
Dana, Leora 104
Dane, Esther 115
Daniels, Danny 382
Darvas, Lili 165
Davis, Fred 91
Davis, Oasie 190
Dawn, Hazel, Jr. 186
Day, Marilyn 344
Deane, Douglas 197
Deel, Sandra 384
Deighton, Marga Ann 205
Derwent, Clarence 104, 177
Des Verney, Harold 171
Devereaux, John Drew 182
Devlin, William 307
Dewing, Elizabeth 190, 224
de Witt, Camilla 112
Diamond, Jack 91
Diener, Joan 244
Diveny, Mary 182
Dixon, Adele 100
Dixon, Robert 122, 240
Dobson, James 231

Cast Index — continued

PAGE

Dolan, Joann 331
Donovan, King 265
Donovan, Tom 152, 265
Dorning, Charles 355, 371, 378, 397, 399
Dosher, George 171
Douglas, Larry 250, 274
Douglas, Scott 307
Douglass, Amy 182
Dowling, Eddie 177
Dowling, Tony 265
Downs, Johnny 374
Drake, Alfred 91, 303
Drakeley, Ray 258
Draper, Margaret 156
Drayson, Danny 240
Dreyfuss, Michael 303
Duke, Robert 128
Dunbar, Ann 358
Dunn, Richard 361, 371, 378, 397, 399
Dunnock, Mildred 190, 313
Dupres, June 234
Dutton, Jimmy 262

E

Edwards, Hilton 351
Ellerbe, Harry 108
Elliot, Rand 265
Elliott, Leonard 228
Emerson, Faye 283
Emerson, Hope 288
Emhardt, Robert 182, 327, 343
England, Paul 197
Enserro, Michael 322
Epperly, Verna 186
Erskine, Marilyn 317
Evans, Bob 274
Evans, Morley 258
Evans, Rex 186
Evensen, Marion G. 327
Everest, Barbara 317
Evers, Herbert 238
Ewell, Tom 244
Eythe, William 122

F

Fabray, Nanette 201
Fadden, Tom 265
Fallon, Joseph 253
Fancourt, Darrell 378, 399
Fane, Caryl 371
Ferguson, William 244, 258
Ferrer, Jose 139
Ferris, Peggy 258
Feury, Margaret 322
Field, Roberta 224
Field, Sylvia 108
Field, Virginia 148
Fields, Peter 235
Findlay, Denise 361, 371, 397
Firko, Vivian 253
Fisher, Nelle 382
Fitzgerald, Neil 374
Fletcher, Lawrence 139
Flynn, Radley 361, 371, 378, 399
Foley, Ken 258
Fonda, Henry 338
Forbes, Ralph 307
Foster, Donald 348
Foster, Lillian 152
Foster, Marie 197
Foster, Stephanie 386
Fox, Janet 165
Francis, Arlene 288
Francis, Charles 128
Frank, David 182
Franklin, Lidija 95
Franklin, Nancy 122
Frasee, Treva 253
Freed, Bert 303
Freeman, Frances 143
French, Peggy 324
Friedlich, Kate 244
Friend, Jack 197
Fuller, Lorenzo 91
Furman, Charles 322

G

Gaige, Russell 128
Gall, Gali 250
Gam, Rita 143
Gannon, Liam 342, 351
Garland, Lenore 152
Garland, Margaret 128
Garner, Ward 258
Garr, Alfred 156
Gear, Luella 186
George, Andrew 152, 265
George, Betty 240
George, Russell 258
Gerson, Hal 303
Giglio, Sandra 104
Gilbert, Lauren 231, 265
Gilbert, Lou 253
Gillingham, Joan 355, 371, 378, 397, 399
Gladstone, Gail 171
Golden, Edward 326, 342, 351
Goode, Jack 271
Gordon, Hayes 244, 258
Gordon, Ruth 190
Gorski, Virginia 364
Gould-Porter, Arthur 292
Graham, Joseph L. 231
Graham, Lee 262
Grautoff, Christiane 165
Gray, Joan 231
Green, Denis 91
Green, Martyn 355, 361, 371, 378, 397, 399
Griffies, Ethel 190, 313
Griffin, Robert E. 228
Groscup, Marie 235
Guglieotti, Vincent 201
Guhlke, Antoinette 122

H

Haas, Hugo 235
Hadfield, Patricia 397
Hagen, Jean 343
Hahn, Herbie 322
Haley, Jack 279
Hall, George 122
Hall, Lois 303
Hall, Michael 386
Halliday, Hildegarde 186
Halman, Ella 355, 361, 371, 378, 397, 399
Hamilton, Gloria 122
Hamilton, Margaret 379
Hamilton, Murray 338
Hamilton, Neil 379
Hammond, Ruth 182
Hancock, Thomas 361, 371
Handzlik, Jean 258
Hanmer, Don 253
Hardie, Russell 394
Harding, Muriel 355
Hardy, Cherry 115
Harold and Lola 250
Harrigan, William 338
Harris, Donny 159
Harris, Holly 201
Harris, Jonathan 104
Harris, Julie 143, 255, 297
Harris, Robert 364
Harrison, Ray 382
Harrison, Rex 128
Hart, Charles 139
Hastings, Donald 205
Havel, Arthur 165
Havel, Morton 165
Hawthorne, Jim 279
Hayes, Peter Lind 240
Hector, Louis 288
Hegira, Ann 253, 297
Heinemann, Eda 152, 348
Helmore, Tom 307
Herbert, Bryan 342, 351
Herget, Bob 122
Hernandez, Juano 171
Herzogs (The) 250
Hess, Harry 297
Hester, Sally 152
Hicks, Patricia 314
Hicks, Russell 218

PAGE

Hill, Annabelle 91
Hill, Steven 253, 338
Hillary, Lucy 271
Hilt, Ferdinand 235
Hines, Theodore 171
Hobbes, Halliwell, Jr. 317
Hodge, Eddie 364
Hoffman, Jane 231
Hogan, Dick 218
Hogue, Bill 240
Holer, Tom 91, 231, 258, 374
Holland, Betty Lou 152
Holloway Sisters (The) 250
Holmes, Madeleine 186
Homolka, Oscar 165, 367
Hosier, Beverly 122
Hoving, Lucas 95
Howard, Jennifer 253
Howard, Norah 329, 334
Howard, Willie 271
Howe, Bette 112
Howell, William 292
Hubbard, Lulu Mae 152
Huber, Paul 231
Hudd, Walter 307
Hudson, John 379
Huff, Betty 235
Hughes, Gwyneth 177
Hughes, Helena 326, 342
Hughes, Mildred 159
Hull, Josephine 177
Humphrey, Cavada 159
Hunt, Marsha 303
Hunt, Martita 104
Hunter, Ian 214
Hurlbut, Gladys 182
Hutchison, Muriel 265
Hutson, Eric 371
Hylton, Richard 283, 367

I

Inescort, Frieda 307
Ireland, John 292
Irvine, Harry 128
Irving, Roy 326, 342, 351

J

Jackson, Anne 205, 367
Jagger, Dean 348
James, Ellen 205
James, Mary 265
James, Spencer 205
Jamison, Marshall 338
Jarman, Reginald 342, 351
Jarmac, Dorothy 240
Jeans, Isabel 115
Jeffreys, Anne 186
Jerome, Edwin 224
Jeter, Bert 292
Johnson, Lamont 297
Jones, Earl 171
Jones, Henry 224, 358
Jones, Louise 265
Jones, Mary Kay 386
Jordan, Jean 112
Jordan, John 338
Joseph, George 253

K

Kane, Edward 95
Kane, John 274
Kane, Whitford 358
Karam, Elena 165
Karen, Anna 132
Karloff, Boris 317
Kasznar, Kurt 115, 303
Kearney, Ty 258
Keats, Viola 128, 317
Keegan, Arthur 297
Keith, Ian 190
Keith, Robert 338
Keith-Johnston, Colin 292

PAGE

Keller, Dorothy 240
Kelley, Bunty 95
Kelly, Al 250
Kelly, William J. 190
Kennedy, Patricia 326, 342
Kenny, Richard 262
Kent, Edgar 197
Kenton, Godfrey 214
Kiity, Jack 382
Kimber, Mary 317
King, Dennis, Jr. 265
King, Dorothy 112
King, Wanza L. 171
Kingsley, Martin 132
Kirk, Lisa 91
Kirk, Patrick 235
Kirkland, Patricia 143, 307
Kitson, Rett 292
Kokic, Kazimir 95
Kosleck, Martin 104
Kraft, Martin 274
Kramer, Mark 201
Krieger, Lee 338
Krohner, Sarah 327
Kruger, Ottilie 218
Kruger, Otto 218
Kuhn, Charles 139

L

Lamb, Gil 258
Landers, Scott 274
Landis, Jessie Royce 367
Lane, Doreen 258
Lane, Edith 186
Lane, James 197, 364
Lane, Rusty 338
Lane, Sylvia 258
Lang, Doreen 115
Lang, Harold 91, 364
Lang, Monica 128
Langford, William 209
La Penna, J. Anthony 132
Lascoe, Henry 322
Law, Jenny Lou 122
Lawrence, Gertrude 329, 334
Lawrence, Jane 197, 279
Lawrence, Marc 374
Lawson, Eleanor 218
Lawson, Sid 274
Layton, William 205
Lazer, Joan 322
Leachman, Cloris 253
Lee, Canada 171
Lee, Kathryn 159
Lee, William 112, 386
Le Gallienne, Eva 327, 343
Lehr, Elmer 253
LeMassena, William 279
Lembeck, Harvey 338
Leonardos, Urylee 171
Leslie, Bethel 152
Leslie, Noel 317
Levene, Sam 148
Lewin, Michael 253
Lewis, Brenda 95
Liberto, Don 364
Liddell, Hilary 390
Lillie, Beatrice 279
Lilling, Bill 91
Linden, Eeta 262
Linden, Marta 379
Lindsay, Howard 182
Linn, Bambi 271
Lister, Moira 100
Litomy, Leslie 303
Little, Betty Greene 205
Liverman, Phyllis 322
Loeb, Philip 322
Lola, Harold and 250
Loring, Estelle 279
Lubbock, Ian 100
Lucas, Jonathan 244
Lukas, Karl 338
Lumb, Geoffrey 177
Lumet, Sidney 262
Lummis, Dayton 214
Luther, Douglas 159

PAGE

Lyday, Paul 274
Lynds, John 197
Lynn, William 139
Lynne, Ada 274
Lyon, Theresa 218

M

MacColl, James 190
MacDonald, Ian 265
MacDonnell, Kyle 382
MacGrath, Leueen 214
MacGregor, Hector 297
MacLiammoir, Micheal 326, 342, 351
Maddern, Merle 327
Maddox, Lou 186
Maguire, Kathleen 253
Mahar, Ellen 253
Maison, Gil 250
Malcolm, Nelly 348
Maley, Peggy 303
Mallory, Burton 139
Malone, Mary 152
Mann, Andrea 271
Mann, Iris 288
Mann, Joan 244, 279
Mann, Paul 297
Marbury, Jane 139
March, Alexander 364
Marcus, Marcia 297
Margetson, Arthur 283
Maricle, Leona 394
Marks, Joe E. 265
Marr, Joe 338
Marsh, Caren 240
Marshall, E. G. 374
Marshall, Fredye 171
Marshall, Jay 301
Marshall, Mort 344
Marshall, William 171
Martel, Remi 240
Mathews, George 139
Martin, Stanley 262
Martin, Winnie-Mae 112, 262
Matsios, Christine 235
Mattox, Matt 235
Maury, Ludlow 128
Maxwell, Arthur 122
Mayo, Don 91
Mazzone 250
McCallion, James 358
McCambridge, Mercedes 143
McCarthy, Kevin 165, 374
McCarty, Mary 244, 258
McClelland, Donald 148
McCord, J. C. 244, 279
McCormick, Myron 303
McDaniel, William 171
McDevitt, Ruth 258
McDonald, Jet 274
McGee, Harold 128
McGovern, John 231
McKee, John 313
McLerie, Allyn Ann 197
McMahon, Horace 132
McMurray, Richard 231
McNair, Emily 327
McQuade, Arlene 205
McQuade, John 297
McRae, Charles 171
McTarnahan, Grace 108
McVey, Pat 274
Meeker, Ralph 338
Mellish, Vera Fuller 224
Mende, William 258
Merande, Doro 139
Merivale, John 128
Merlin, Frank 358
Merman, Ruth 240
Mianns, Moses 171
Middleton, Jane 148
Middleton, Ray 201
Miles, Ruth 386
Miller, Hugh 100
Miller, Lorraine 235
Miller, Paula 322
Milletaire, Carl 235
Mills, Grace 177
Mintz, Eli 322

PAGE

Misener, Helen 390
Mitchell, George 152
Mitchell, Margaret 355, 371, 397
Mitchell, Millard 288
Moffet, Sally 143
Monks, James 224
Montgomery, Earl 205
Moore, Brennan 112
Moore, Melton 186
Moore, Meriel 326, 343, 351
Morgan, C. William 355, 361, 399
Morgenthaler, Leonard 235
Morisco, Patricia 91
Morley, Robert 214
Morrissey, Betty 143
Morrissey, Marguerite 182
Morrow, Doretta 197
Morton, Tommy 122
Mudie, Leonard 218
Mullins, Bartlett 100
Murphy, Ann 143
Murray, Peter 390
Murray, Wynn 240

N

Nagel, Conrad 152
Nannary, Edward 231
Neise, George 228
Nelson, Barry 148
Nelson, Gene 122
Nevard, Billy 386
Newell, Joan 390
Newton, Richard 214
Newton, Theodore 303
Nick, Bobby 262
Nicol, Alex 253
Niles, Melva 235
Noble, Emily 394
Nolan, Patrick 342, 351
Norman, Natalie 186
Norton, Dean 313
Norvello, Mitzi 250
Nunn, Barbara 240
Nye, Lewis 279

O

Oakland, Si 148
Ober, Philip 148
O'Brien, Shaun 258
O'Connor, Peggy 143
O'Connor, Una 317
Oldroyd, Margery 258
O'Mahony, Nora 326, 342, 351
Opatoshu, David 322
Operti, Le Roi 104
O'Rourke, Edna 342
Osborn, Leonard 355, 361, 371, 378, 397, 399
Osterwald, Bibi 271
Oswald, Virginia 244

P

Pagent, Robert 95
Palance, Walter 265
Palmer, Byron 197
Palmer, Maria 265
Palmer, Thomas 297
Parber, Victor 231
Parks, Hildy 205
Parsons, Billy 240
Parsons, Milton 265
Paterson, Kenneth 218
Paterson, Ted 283
Patston, Doris 186
Patton, Barbara 186
Patton, Lucille 303
Paul, Jo Anne 182
Payn, Graham 329, 334
Pearce, Alice 244, 364
Pearce, Ann 265
Pechner, Gerhard 235

PAGE

Persoff, Nehemiah 253
Peterson, Lenka 143, 253, 394
Petina, Irra 235
Phelan, Mary Lou 143
Phillips, Margaret 305
Phillips, Wendell K. 128
Piazza, Marguerite 95
Picon, Molly 156
Pierpont, Laura 190, 258
Pinto, Dorothea 159
Platt, Edward 139
Platt, Louise 128
Plummer, Ted 156
Pope, Patty 152
Popwell, Albert 279
Potter, Penelope 297
Povah, Phyllis 148
Powell, Bertha T. 171
Pratt, Peter 361
Prince, Eileen 228
Pugsley, Jean 156

Q

Quadri, Therese 209
Questel, Mae 348

R

Raitt, John 235
Rall, Tommy 244, 364
Rand, Edith 374
Raphael, Gerrianne 152
Ratner, Herb 303
Raymond, Ken 297
Raymond, Roy 235
Redgrave, Michael 297
Redman, Joyce 128
Reed, Dan 265
Reed, Janet 364
Reed, Paul 274
Reedy, William 159
Rees, Judson 297
Rees, Milton 355
Reese, Henry 235
Reid, Carl Benton 386
Reid, Elliott 297
Reilly, Michael 297
Reiner, Carl 279
Remo, Kenneth 258
Renan, Emile 95
Rennie, Hugh 303
Repp, Ellen 258
Reyes, Eva 250
Reyes, Raul 250
Rhoades, Richard 258
Rhodes, Marjorie 390
Rich, Doris 104, 398
Rich, Irene 159
Richardson, Emory 190
Ritchard, Cyril 115
Ritter, Margaret 258
Rivera, Pamela 112
Roache, Viola 115
Robbins, Larry 258
Roberts, Helen 361, 378, 399
Roberts, Ralph 104
Robertson, William 388
Robinson, Bartlett 148
Robinson, Virginia 394
Robson, Flora 297
Roerick, William 329, 334
Rogers, Budd 274
Rogers, Emmett 317
Romano, Peggy 156
Rose, Donald 262
Rose, Teddy 382
Ross, Alan 244
Ross, Anthony 288, 374
Ross, Elizabeth 177
Round, Thomas 371, 378, 399
Rozan, Gertrude 228
Ruick, Melville 186
Russel, John 258
Russell, Jack 159, 240
Russell, Marian 156
Rutherford, Douglas 274
Ryder, Alfred 343
Ryder, Klock 224

PAGE

S

St. Helier, Ivy 100
Sanders, Richard 104
Sargent, Anne 379
Sarnoff, Dorothy 235
Sattler, Dan 364
Saville, Ruth 113, 274
Sawyer, Connie 250
Scanlon, Marion 171
Scheerer, Bob 122
Scheff, Fritzi 165
Schickling, John 235
Scholle, Lewis 258
Schorr, Sally 322
Schurgot, Helena 274
Seamon, Helen 265
Selby, Harry 128
Selwart, Tonio 262
Sergava, Katharine 364
Seton, Joan 100
Seymour, Jane 374
Seymour, John 148, 265
Shackleton, Robert 271
Sharp, Louis 171
Shawley, Bob 274
Shawn, Richy 156
Shay, Alan 258
Shayne, Alan 104
Shean, Al 348
Sheehan, Jack 358
Sheehan, John 159
Sheldon, Bert 240
Shelley, Joshua 382
Shepard, Joan 186
Sheppard, Harry 190
Sherman, Hiram 224
Sherwood, James 338
Showalter, Max 382
Silver, Richard 171
Simmons, Stanley 95
Simon, Robert 253
Simpson, Ivan 115
Sledge, Eddie 91
Sloan, Mary Jane 186
Sloan, Robin 258
Small, Edgar 374
Smiley, Ralph 104
Smith, Augustus 228
Smith, Jeanine 122
Smith, Merritt 171
Smith, Michael 182
Smith, Mildred Joanne 171
Sokoloff, Vladimir 104
Soltez, Chase 139
Sorel, Sonia 190
Sorensen, Holger 95, 271
Sorg, Ann 143
Sorin, Louis 322
Spaulding, Kenneth 159
Spaull, Guy 115, 190, 265
Stacy, Lee 122
Stafford, Curt 159
Stanley, Bette 143
Starbuck, James 258
Starr, Frances 143
Stehli, Edgar 165
Steiner, Eugene 374
Stephens, Ray 279
Stevens, Connie 250
Stevens, Morton L. 108, 358
Stevens, Warren 253
Stevenson, Allan 128
Stevenson, Margot 190
Stewart, Devida 244
Stewart, Johnny 201
Stewart, Larry 122
Stewart, Marianne 374
Stickney, Dorothy 182
Stock, Nigel 307
Stoddard, Haila 348
Stone, Jerry 262
Stone, Robinson 297
Stone, Sid 250
Straight, Beatrice 297
Straub, John 297
Stringer, Lewis 390
Strongin, Mimi 262
Stroud, Claude 240
Stuart, Jeanne 292
Sturrey, Waldo 214

PAGE

Sullivan, Gloria 271
Sullivan, Jo 258
Sullivan, Joe 253
Sumsten, Kaja 258
Sweeney, Joseph 231
Sydnor, Earl 171
Sylvester, John 253

T

Taft, Sara 112
Talma, Zolya 165
Tapps, George 250
Taylor, Evelyn 244
Terry, Kenneth 262
Tetzel, Joan 132, 386
Thatcher, Torin 214
Thaxter, Phyllis 253
Theadore, Ralph 205
Thomajan, Guy 132
Thomas, David 201
Thomas, Frank M. 313
Thomas, Rhys 361
Thomas, Ruth 159
Thompson, Ann 386
Thorton, Drake 348
Thornton, Evans 201
Tobey, Kenneth 374
Tobin, Gene 201
Tonge, Philip 115, 288, 329, 334
Toone, Geoffrey 297
Tormsen, Norval 186
Tozzi, George 95
Trevor, Austin 100
Truex, Ernest 108
Truhill, Lee 143
Tweddell, Frank 231
Tyers, John 279

V

Valentine, Grace 231
Van Buren, A. H. 182
Van Sickle, Raymond 205
Van Sloun, Edward 265
Varela, Nina 240
Varron, Allegra 186
Vernon, Whit 297
Victor, Eric 279

W

Wade, Robert 182
Wagner, Franklin 258
Walden, Bertha 322
Walker, June 313
Walker, Nancy 364
Walker, Rhoderick 329, 334
Walker, Richard 355, 361, 378, 397, 399
Wall, Mildred 313
Wallace, Andree 358
Walsh, Enid 371, 399
Walston, Ray 206, 374
Walters, Casey 338
Wanamaker, Sam 152
Waram, Percy 128
Ward, John 258
Ward, Trevor 390
Ware, John 152
Warfield, William 171
Warner, Jack 274
Watson, Betty Jane 159, 250, 258
Watson, Douglas 190
Watson, Richard 361, 371, 399
Wayne, David 338
Webb, Gillian 297
Weber, Lawrence 186
Weeks, Marion 386
Welch, Loren 364
Welch, Mary 303
Wentler, Fred 283
Wenzel, Helen 274
Westerfield, James 104
Westman, Nydia 104, 386

PAGE

Wheeler, Lois 143
Whipper, Leigh 171
White, Bobby 258
White, Jesse 132
Wickes, Mary 224
Wilcox, Bert 258
Wilcox, Lee 177
Wilcoxon, Henry 265
Willard, Catherine 115
Willey, Robert 379
Williams, Enid 250
Williams, Gwilym 177
Williams, John 128, 379
Williams, Musa 171
Williamson, Rosemary 159
Wilson, Eleanor 139
Wilson, Frank 171
Winwood, Estelle 104
Wolfson, Martin 288
Wood, Charles 91, 271
Wood, Victor 292
Worth, Harry 190
Wright, Joyce 399
Wymore, Patricia 274

PAGE

Y

Yun, Tom Chung 386

Z

Zimbalist, Efrem, Jr. 327

Authors

Abbott, George 197
Amsterdam, Morey 250
Anderson, Maxwell 128
Arthur, Art 274
Auerbach, Arnold 279
Axelrod, George 244
Barker, Albert Wineman 228
Battista, Miriam 258
Benson, E. F. 115
Berg, Gertrude 322
Berns, Julie 156
Bodeen, DeWitt 394
Bolton, Guy 271
Brennan, Frederick Hazlitt 235
Breuer, Bessie 253
Brooks, Matt 274
Burnand, F. C. 378
Cheever, John 224
Clements, Colin 386
Cobb, Elisabeth 379
Connelly, Marc 231
Coward, Noel 209, 329, 334
Crouse, Russel 182
Curran, Homer 235
Day, Clarence 182
Duncan, Ronald 95
Estry, Joseph L. 348
Ferber, Edna 165
Fodor, Ladislas 285
Franken, Rose 313
Gaynor, Charles 122
Gilbert, W. S. 355, 361, 371, 378, 391, 399
Giraudoux, Jean 104
Glickman, Will 122
Goldbaum, Peter 367
Goodman, Arthur 262
Gordon, Ruth 190
Guitry, Sacha 100
Gunther, John 279
Harris, Howard 250
Hart, Moss 148, 279
Heggen, Thomas 338
Heyward, Dorothy 171
Horwitt, Arnold B. 279, 382
Hughes, Richard 177
Hutton, Michael Clayton 390
Ibsen, Henrik 327, 343
Irving, Washington 258
Jamerson, Pauline 108
Johnston, Denis 342
Kanin, Fay 152
Kaufman, George S. 165
Kerr, Jean 112
Krasna, Norman 218
Langley, Noel 214
Laun, Louis 244
Lawrence, Jerome 364
Lee, Robert E. 364
Le Gallienne, Eva 327, 343
Leigh, Rowland 186
Lerner, Alan Jay 201
Lindsay, Howard 182
Logan, Joshua 338
MacLiammoir, Micheal 326
Maloney, Russell 358
Marx, Groucho 218
McEnroe, Robert E. 139
Molnar, Ferenc 288
Morley, Robert 214
Morton, Maddison 378
Nash, N. Richard 143
Paul, Louis 288
Powys, Stephen 100
Priestley, J. B. 317
Robbins, Jerome 364
Robey, Ken 250
Roos, William 159
Ryerson, Florence 386
Sartre, Jean-Paul 132
Sayers, Michael 358
Scott, Allan 303
Shakespeare, William 297
Shaw, George Bernard 307, 351
Shaw, Irwin 374
Sheldon, Edward 186
Short, Robin 367
Spalding, Charles 244
Spewack, Bella 91
Spewack, Samuel 91
Stein, Joseph 122
Strindberg, August 367
Taradash, Daniel 132
Telfer, Ronald 108
Thomas, Brandon 197
Tonkonogy, Gertrude 224
Trivers, Barry 240
Valency, Maurice 104
Van Druten, John 115
Viertel, Peter 374
Wilk, Max 244
Williams, Herschel 379
Williams, Tennessee 205
Winter, Keith 292
Wodehouse, P. G. 283
Zelinka, Sidney 250

Managers or Producers

Abbott, George 364
Actors Studio 253
Aldrich, Richard 152, 326, 342, 351
American Repertory Theatre 327, 343
American Theater Group 228
Ayres, Lemuel 91
Barnard, Harold 348
Beckhard, Arthur J. 394
Berney, William 271
Bromley, Harald 262
Buchanan, Jack 100
Cardelli, Giovanni 95
Cohen, Alexander H. 112
Crawford, Cheryl 201
Cummings, David 322
Curran, Homer 235, 329, 334
Czinner, Paul 288
Dalrymple, Jean 132
de Liagre, Alfred, Jr. 104
Dietz, David 177
Doherty, Brian 297, 326, 342, 351
D'Oyly Carte Opera Company 355, 361, 371, 378, 397, 399
Dublin Gate Theatre 326, 342, 351
Elliott, James S. 292
Ellis, Michael 112, 283, 367
Ephraim, Lee 100
Evans, Maurice, Productions, Inc. 317
Ewing, Marjorie 95
Ewing, Sherman 95
Eythe, William 122
Feigay, Paul 322
Feuer, Cy 197
Fields, William 190
Fischer, Alfred 307
Freedley, Vinton 143
Gabel, Martin 374
Gassner, John 177
Gilbert, Franklin 122
Gordon, Max 165, 224
Hart, Bernard 148, 374
Hayward, Leland 128, 338
Healey, Eunice 262
Houseman, John 303
Hyman, Joseph M. 148, 382
Jaeger, C. P. 288
Jones, Margo 205
Kanin, Michael 152
Katzell, William R. 122, 303
Kay, David 156
Kenwith, Herbert 322
Krakeur, Richard W. 143
Lambert, Sammy 274
Lawrence, Bea 358
Lester, Edwin 235
Lester, Lorraine 258
Lewis, Russell 218, 329, 334
Litwack, Ned C. 240
Luckenbach, Edgar F. 379
Markey, Alexander 265
Martin, Ernest H. 197
Meloney, William Brown 313
Miller, Gilbert 214, 283
Myers, Richard 152, 326, 342, 351
Nichols, George, 3d 244
Playwrights' Company 128
Proser, Monte 240
Rickard, Gwen 197
Robey, Ken 250
Russo, James 112, 283, 367
Samrock, Victor 190
Schreuer, Carl 292
Schwartz, Arthur 279
Serlin, Oscar 182
Shapiro, Clarence M. 112
Sherek, Henry 214
Shubert, Messrs. 186, 390
Singer, Louis J. 253, 327, 343
Smith, Oliver 322
Stromberg, Hunt, Jr. 271
Subber, Saint 91
Theatre Associates, Inc. 367
Theatre Guild 115, 139, 171, 307
Theatre, Incorporated 297
Todd, Michael 159
Waxman, Philip A. 386
Wilson, John C. 209, 390
Wiman, Dwight Deere 231
Yorke, John 108
Young, Howard 218, 329, 334
Zucker, Stan 250

PAGE

Stage Directors

Abbott, George 197, 364
Anderson, John Murray 240
Appell, Don 348
Ashmore, Peter 214, 307
Barker, Albert Wineman 228
Bay, Howard 159
Beckhard, Arthur J. 394
Berns, Julie 156
Bethell, Anna 355, 361, 371, 397, 399
Churman, Harold 143
Connelly, Marc 231
Coward, Noel 329, 334
Crabtree, Paul 139
Cximner, Paul 288
Dassin, Jules 235, 303
de Liagre, Alfred, Jr. 104
de Mille, Agnes 95
Dowling, Eddie 177, 240
Edwards, Hilton 326, 342, 351
Ellerbe, Harry 108
Elliott, James S. 292
Franken, Rose 313
Gabel, Martin 374
Gerson, Hal 122
Gibson, Chloe 390
Gilbert, Billy 271
Gordon, Robert H. 279
Harris, Jed 132
Hart, Moss 148
Houghton, Norris 297
Jones, Margo 205
Kanin, Garson 190
Kaufman, George S. 165, 224
Kazan, Elia 201, 253
Krasna, Norman 218
Le Gallienne, Eva 327
Leigh, Rowland 186
Logan, Joshua 338
Manulis, Martin 209, 379
Markey, Alexander 265
McClintic, Guthrie 182
Miller, Gilbert 283
O'Shaughnessy, John 258, 367
Perry, Robert E. 274
Potter, H. C. 128
Ritt, Martin 171
Robbins, Jerome 364
Ruskin, Coby 358
Russo, James 112
Schaefer, George 317
Schneider, Bernc 398
Shevelove, Burt 244
Short, Hassard 382
Stoker, Willard 100
Stone, Ezra 322
Tripp, Paul 262
Van Druten, John 115
Wanamaker, Sam 152
Webster, Margaret 343
Wilson, John C. 91

PAGE

Scenic Designers

Alswang, Ralph ... 112, 171, 231, 244, 262, 367, 388
Aronson, Boris 201, 374
Ayers, Lemuel 91, 279
Ballard, Lucinda 115
Barrett, Watson 186, 343
Bay, Howard 159, 235
Berard, Christian 104
Brodkin, Herbert 139
Chaney, Stewart 132, 182, 271, 307, 348
Crayon 250
Davey, Leon 100
De Forest, William 292
Du Bois, Raoul Pene 122, 240
Edwards, Ben 253
Elson, Charles 209, 288, 358, 390
Pfolkes, David 197
Fox, Frederick 148, 382
Gassner, Mordi 177
Gilbert, Edward 274
Harker, Joseph 378
Harker, Phil 378
Horner, Harry 303, 322
Jenkins, George 218, 329, 334
Kerz, Leo 156, 165
MacEwen, Molly 326, 342, 351
MacLiammoir, Micheal 342
Messel, Oliver 283
Mielziner, Jo 128, 205, 258, 338
Morrison, Paul 143
Oenslager, Donald 152, 182, 190, 234, 379
Piper, John 95
Ricketts, Charles 371
Roth, Wolfgang 108
Sheriff, Paul 297
Sheringham, George 355
Smith, Oliver 364
Sovey, Raymond 214, 328, 313, 394
Wolf, Peter 317
Yellenti 265

Composers, Lyric Writers, Librettists

Aarons, Ruth Hughes 258
Adamson, Harold 159
Arnold, Stanley 250
Battista, Miriam 258
Bergersen, Baldwin 244
Bowles, Paul 205
Britten, Benjamin 95
Brown, Billings 244
Bush, Alan 297
Dietz, Howard 279
Engel, Lehman 128, 322
Forrest, George 235
Gaynor, Charles 122
Gilbert, W. S. 355, 361, 371, 378, 397, 399
Gorney, Jay 240
Grey, Clifford 271
Haas, Alexander 104
Hague, Albert 104
Horwitt, Arnold B. 382
Kaye, Buddy 250
Kern, Jerome 271
Lampl, Carl 250
Leigh, Rowland 186
Lerner, Alan Jay 201
Lerner, Sam 274
Lessner, George 258
Lewine, Richard 382
Loesser, Frank 197
Maloney, Russell 258
Marks, Gerald 274
Martin, Hugh 364
McGinley, Phyllis 244
McHugh, Jimmy 159
Porter, Cole 91
Romberg, Sigmund 186
Schwartz, Arthur 279
Selden, Albert 244
Sullivan, Arthur 355, 361, 371, 378, 397, 399
Trivers, Barry 240
Villa-Lobos, Heitor 235
Weill, Kurt 201
Wodehouse, P. G. 271
Wright, Robert 235

Dance Directors

Abbott, George 364
Balanchine, George 197
Barstow, Richard 271, 329, 334
Castle, Nick 240
Champion, Gower 122, 244
Cole, Jack 235
Daniells, Fred 197
Holm, Hanya 91
Kelly, Frederic N. 186
Kidd, Michael 201, 274
Pan, Hermes 159
Robbins, Jerome 364
Sherman, Lee 382
Sokolow, Anna 258
Tamiris, Helen 279
Tapps, George 250

"Kiss Me, Kate"

The New York Times

DECEMBER 31, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Taking an obliging hint from Shakespeare, the makers of "Kiss Me, Kate" have put together a thoroughly enjoyable musical comedy, acted at the New Century last evening. Shakespeare has supplied a few bedraggled scenes from "The Taming of the Shrew." Using these as a springboard into festivity, Bella and Samuel Spewack have contrived an authentic book which is funny without the interpolation of gags.

Cole Porter has written his best score in years, together with witty lyrics. Under Hanya Holm's direction, the dancing is joyous. And Lemuel Ayers has provided carnival costumes and some interesting scenery.

* * *

Occasionally by some baffling miracle, everything seems to drop gracefully into its appointed place, in the composition of a song show, and that is the case here. No one has had to break his neck to dazzle the audience with his brilliance, and no one has had to run at frantic speed to get across the rough spots. As far as the Spewacks are concerned, "Kiss Me, Kate" is the story of a vainglorious actor and his temperamental ex-wife who are starring in a revival of "The Taming of the Shrew" in Baltimore. Although the Shakespeare circus has had some bad performances, none has been worse than the burlesque Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison have inflicted on it here.

* * *

The Italian setting has another practical advantage. It gives Mr. Porter an opportunity to poke beyond Tin Pan Alley into a romantic mood. Without losing his sense of humor, he has written a remarkable melodious score with an occasional suggestion of Puccini, who was a good composer, too. Mr. Porter has always enjoyed the luxury of rowdy tunes, and he has scribbled a few for the current festival—"Another O'p'nin', Another Show," "We Open In Venice," "Too Darn Hot" and "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," which is fresh out of the honky-tonks. All his lyrics are literate, and as usual some of them would shock the editorial staff of The Police Gazette.

But the interesting thing about the new score is the enthusiasm Mr. Porter has for romantic melodies indigenous to the soft climate of the Mediterranean. Although "Wunderbar" is probably a little north of the Mediterranean Sea, the warm breezes flow through it; and "So In Love Am I" has a very florid temperature, indeed.

The plot device concentrates the acting and singing in four people, and fortunately they are all uncommonly talented. As a grease-paint hussy, Miss Morison is an agile and humorous actress who is not afraid of slapstick and who can sing enchantingly. She has captured perfectly the improvised tone of the comedy, and she plays it with spirit and drollery. Lisa Kirk plays a subordinate part in a style that might be described as well-bred impudence. Given a sardonic song like "Always True to You (In My Fashion)," she can translate it into pert and gleaming buffoonery.

* * *

We have all been long acquainted with Mr. Drake as headman in musical shows. In the part of the egotistical actor who plays Petruchio on stage, Mr. Drake's pleasant style of acting and his unaffected singing are the heart of the show. By hard work and through personal sincerity, Mr. Drake has become about the most valuable man in his field. In the secondary male role, Harold Lang, who is principally a dancer, also gives a versatile and attractive performance.

Under the supervision of John C. Wilson there are other treasures in this humorous phantasmagoria of song—the torrid pavement dancing of Fred Davis and Eddie Sledge, the bland gunman fooling of Harry Clark and Jack Diamond, the antic dancing masquerade that serves as first scene to "The Taming of the Shrew" sequence.

All these items have been gathered up neatly into the flowing pattern of a pleasant musical comedy. To filch a good notion from The New Yorker, all you can say for "Kiss Me, Kate" is that it is terribly enjoyable.

'KISS ME, KATE.'

Musical comedy, with music and lyrics by Cole Porter; book by Bella and Samuel Spewack; choreography by Hanya Holm; settings and costumes by Lemuel Ayers; musical director, Pembroke Davenport; orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett; incidental ballet music arranged by Genevieve Pitot; production staged by John C. Wilson; presented by Saint Subber and Lemuel Ayers at the Century Theater, Thursday evening, December 30, 1948. The cast:

Fred Graham	Alfred Drake
Harry Trevor	Thomas Hoier
Lois Lane	Lisa Kirk
Ralph (Stage Manager)	Don Mayo
Lilli Vanessi	Patricia Morison
Hattie	Annabelle Hill
Paul	Lorenzo Fuller
Bill Calhoun	Harold Lang
First Man	Harry Clark
Second Man	Jack Diamond
Stage Doorman	Bill Lilling
Harrison Howell	Denis Green

Specialty Dancers, Fred Davis, Eddie Sledge

'TAMING OF THE SHREW' PLAYERS.

Bianca (Lois Lane)	Lisa Kirk
Baptista (Harry Trevor)	Thomas Hoier
Gremio (First Suitor)	Edwin Clay
Hortensio (Second Suitor)	Charles Wood
Lucentio (Bill Calhoun)	Harold Lang
Katharine (Lilli Vanessi), Patricia Morison	
Petruchio (Fred Graham)	Alfred Drake
Haberdasher	John Castello
Tailor	Marc Breaux

Journal American

DECEMBER 31, 1948

A Musical Comedy That Has Everything

By ROBERT GARLAND

If "Kiss Me, Kate" isn't the best musical-comedy I ever saw, I don't remember what the best musical-comedy I ever saw was called. It, the Cole Porter-Bella and Samuel Spewack song-and-dance show now up near Central Park, has everything.

By everything I mean a grand score, a good book and a fine cast. To these, add imaginous choreography by Hanya Holm, ingenious decor by Lemuel Ayres, and inventive direction by John C. Wilson. The sum of these is a show of shows!

A show of shows that is literate without being highbrow, sophisticated without being smarty, seasoned without being soiled and funny without being vulgar. Among its major contributions, that of Cole Porter is foremost.

His score is his best one. From "Another Opening, Another Show," which gets the evening going, to "I Am Ashamed That Women Are So Simple," which leads into the grand finale, melody follows melody with more than Porterian profusion.

And the words are wise, as in "Why Can't You Behave," "Where Is the Life That Late I Led?" and "Always True to You in My Fashion," or witty, as in "I've Come to Wive It Wealthily in Padua," "Bianca" and "Brush Up on Your Shakespeare."

Or romantic, as in: "I Sing of Love," "Were Thine That Special Face," "Wunderbar" and "So in Love Am I." Or just plain "Too Darn Hot," which I could listen to all evening.

* * *

A Good Book

The Spewacks have provided a book from which these grand words-and-music stem. It's a good book, telling of a traveling Group Theatre outfit offering Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" in unappreciative Baltimore, my Baltimore.

Ford's Theatre—Ford's Grand Opera House when I began my life of theatregoing there—is the scene of the play within a musical comedy. According to the traveling Petruchio, there are deer up in the balcony and he wishes he had brought his gun.

The traveling Petruchio is Fred Graham who, in turn, is Alfred Drake. His traveling Katharine is Lilli Vanessi who, in turn, is Patricia Morison. Off stage, as well as on, they are Petruchio and Katharine in deed, word and action.

In and out of "The Taming of the Shrew" they love because they hate. On stage and off, they hate because they love. Constantly does their own private story parallel Shakespeare's public one.

Involved in their private story are a pair of Monumental City gangsters. And a front-and-backstage Bianca and Lucentio. And a dresser for Petruchio and a maid for Katharine. And a Big Businessman who presents President Truman a player-piano.

These, and some native Baltimoreans, make their entrances and exits while Cole Porter's grand words-and-music occupy the intervals.

Canny Supervision

No musical comedy — that is what Saint Subber and Lemuel Ayers call their joint production—could have the benefit of more canny supervision. Mr. Wilson has turned his attention to direction with humor, thoroughness and skill.

As Fred Graham who is Petruchio, and as Lilli Vanessi who is Katharine, Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison are to the manner born. They can act. They can sing. They can do both at the same time when requested. They are excellent sparrers, too!

Harold Lang, the Bill Calhoun who is Lucentio, is now a dancer who can act, an actor who can sing. His "Bianca" number is delicious. So is Lisa Kirk's "Always True to You in My Fashion." And Lorenzo Fuller's "Too Darn Hot."

The dancing, as I've said, has imagination for which Hanya Holm is responsible. Robert Russell Bennett's orchestrations are becoming to the Cole Porter melodies. The orchestra, under Pembroke Davenport, is happy in its work. And helpful.

Last night, when I left the Century, the excited congregation was crying "Bravo" for Cole Porter and Lee Shubert was in the box-office selling seats for next year's Christmas holidays. "Kiss Me, Kate," is number one on the Broadway musical hit parade.

New York Post

DECEMBER 31, 1948

New Musical Comedy Lives Up to Promise

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The electric excitement that comes to the theatre when everything goes right was present at the Century last night with the arrival of "Kiss Me, Kate," the new musical comedy that Cole Porter and the Spewacks have made out of our old friend, "The Taming of the Shrew." From the opening number it was obvious to everybody that the first-nighters were seeing a smash hit of epic proportions, and nothing occurred throughout the evening to let them down. "Kiss Me, Kate" is beautiful, tuneful, witty, gay, high-spirited and delightfully sung, acted and danced. Again the American musical comedy proved itself the best in the world.

Since there is nothing to do but make this notice a list of tributes to those involved, I might as well begin with the popular and successful William Shakespeare. There is a surprising lot of "The Taming of the Shrew" in the excellent book that Bella and Samuel Spewack have devised by the simple and sensible process of mixing the Shakespearean play with the fortunes of a modern actor and actress who are appearing in it. The scheme turns out exceptionally well, and it only remains to be said that the team of Shakespeare and Spewack works as harmoniously as the collaboration of Spewack and Cole Porter.

The Music

For Mr. Porter, the new musical comedy must be a particularly gratifying success, since there had been dark rumors abroad that the eminent composer had lost some of his old-time power. There is no sign of any such decline in either the music or lyrics of "Kiss Me, Kate." There are some 17 numbers, and all of them are worth listening to. There is no one song that struck me as standing out above the rest on first hearing and the words are probably better than the tunes, but it all adds up into a vastly engaging score. I guess I liked "Where Is the Life That Late I Led?" best of all.

Since I want to save the brilliant work of Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison for the end, there are a number of credits to be run through immediately, and it is a little difficult to decide where to start. There is co-producer Lemuel Ayers' really beautiful sets and costumes. There is the excellent choreography of Hanya Holm and the fine dancing of Harold Lang. There is Lisa Kirk's amusing singing of a good comic song called "Always True in My Fashion." There is the successful comedy of Harry Clark and Jack Diamond as two gangsters entangled in Shakespeare, and a gay number called "Too Darn Hot" and John C. Wilson's adroit staging. And I'm sure I left out somebody.

Patricia Morison

Finally getting around to Miss Morison, I am happy to state that she is a delight as the shrew who is tamed. Having seen this stunning young woman playing an endless series of baffled menaces in dubious movies and having long suspected that this was one of the signs of Hollywood's idiocy, I found gratification in noting that she looks beautiful, sings charmingly, acts with fire, spirit and a sparkling sense of comedy, and, in general, proves herself a performer of genuine personal distinction. No wonder Hollywood is in such a sorry state.

As for Mr. Drake, as the shrew's tamer, it is time we accepted the fact that he is one of the authentic stars of the American theatre. He can play straight roles and musical comedy with equal facility, and he never fails to seem at home in what he does. He is at his best in "Kiss Me, Kate," playing with humor, style and forcefulness. Mr. Drake is that rare phenomenon on the modern stage, an actor with the ability to play romantic roles with both grace and masculine vigor. He aids immeasurably in making "Kiss Me, Kate" a musical comedy to be cherished.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 31, 1948

'Kiss Me, Kate' Is Cole Porter's Sprightliest and Best Musical

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The greetings of the season. All you need do for a happy new year is to hie yourself and your lady to the Century Theatre to see "Kiss Me, Kate." If you can't make it in 1949, do it in 1950, for here is the sprightliest, handsomest and most tuneful musical imaginable.

A great many talented people, from Will Shakespeare to Robert Russell Bennett, have worked on this show, but the main man, and the one who gets the fondest of greetings from this celebrant, is Cole Porter. In "Kiss Me, Kate," Mr. Porter has provided his loveliest and most exuberant score, with lyrics to match.

From the curtain-raiser, "Another Op'nin', Another Show," to the finale there isn't a number which isn't delightful. The only one which approaches being a stage wait is a comic duet about the advantages of quoting Shakespeare—a next-to-closing interlude to give the stage hands time enough to set the last of Lemuel Ayers' handsome big sets. This one would be funnier if it were shorter—but it can't be shorter unless the grips are quicker.

Mixing Up the Bard.

Maxwell Anderson made a play about a play in "Joan of Lorraine," and Bella and Samuel Spewack have made a libretto about a play in "Kiss Me, Kate." Their story is a backstage and out-front story about a group of players performing "The Taming of the Shrew"—and Kate was never-madder at Petruchio than Patricia Morison is at Alfred Drake. The Spewacks have had a jaunty time mixing up the plot of "The Shrew."

Last evening's premiere was an affair of zest and confidence on both sides of the footlights. On the stage, thanks to the direction of John C. Wilson and the dance instruction by Hanya Holm, every single member of a big and handsome company acted, sang or danced as if he just knew he was good—and he was.

Miss Morison, whose only other appearance here in a musical was in the small and charming "The Two Bouquets" about ten years ago, returns from Hollywood to give a spirited performance as the actress who is a shrew offstage as well as on. Besides being a most beguiling singer—witness "Wunderbar," "So in Love Am I" and "I Am Ashamed That Women Are So Simple"—she is a capital comedienne. What she was doing messing around in Hollywood all that time when she could be amounting to something I don't know.

Opposite her is Mr. Drake, handsome and alive and an ideal woman-tamer. This old "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" boy is no slouch of a singer, of course; he also is a capital comedian. His number, "Where is the Life That Late I Led" is done with great charm and humor, and his reprise of "So in Love Am I" is beautifully managed.

Lisa Kirk a Hit

With Morison and Drake taking care of the Shakespeare-Spewack plots, there is room for Lisa Kirk, the rather lugubrious nurse who sang "The Gentleman Is a Dope" in "Allegro," to cut loose as a heyden and sing some of Mr. Porter's most fetching numbers. They range from a ballad, "Why Can't You Behave" to an immensely funny and raffish confession, "Always True to You."

There are many more who help make "Kiss Me, Kate" the pleasure it is. Harold Lang, dancing and singing; Harry Clark and Jack Diamond as a pair of goons; Fred Davis and Eddie Sledge, dancers, and Annabelle Hill, who starts things rolling with "Another Opn'in'." Miss Holm's young ladies are attractive and their work has style, and Mr. Ayers' costumes, particularly in the Paduan scenes, are admirable.

So, once again, a happy new year to everybody at the Century on both sides of the foots. And to producers Saint Subber and Ayers, Pembroke Davenport and his men in the pit, and Robert Russell Bennett, who orchestrated Mr. Porter's songs and helped make them so enjoyable.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 31, 1948

= By HOWARD BARNES =

A Kiss to Remember

THERE is next to nothing wanting in "Kiss Me, Kate," the prodigal and exultant musical comedy which has opened at the New Century Theater. With enchanting Cole Porter songs, a neat and amusing book by Bella and Samuel Spewack, a truly great performance by Alfred Drake, and resplendent settings and costumes by Lemuel Ayers, it is a bewitching entertainment. Hanya Holm's choreography weaves brilliantly through the tale of a bickering husband and ex-wife trying out "Taming of the Shrew" in Baltimore. The players, from Drake's co-star, Patricia Morison and the featured Harold Lang and Lisa Kirk, down to the minor members of the ensemble, are triumphantly assured, as they should be. And John C. Wilson has staged the work with consummate style and pace.

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It is difficult to catalogue all the virtues of this lavish and memorable musical. Porter has written the gayest music and lyrics he has in years, with "Why Can't You Behave," "So In Love Am I" and "Always True to You" outstanding numbers. Drake delivers several of them with such vocal authority, while pointing up the comical aspects of the Spewacks' libretto, that they rarely fail to demand and deserve encores. Miss Kirk takes over the show momentarily in her rendition of "Always True to You" and Miss Morison is wonderfully effective, whether she is singing, or enacting the play within a play which gives rich substance to the doings. Lang is a dancing fool, and a couple of veteran vaudevillians, Harry Clark and Jack Diamond, add to the general and irresistible gaiety.

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The original idea of Ayers and his co-producer, Saint Subber, to make a musical version of the Shakespeare comedy has found fruitful realization in the book. The Spewacks have shuttled back and forth between a contemporary parallel to the disciplining of a waspish woman and fragments of the classic itself. It is enough that the action is full of humor, movement and appropriate song cues, whether it is set back stage at the Ford's Theater try-out or assembles the principals in fancy costumes in Padua. Drake, as both leading man of the company and Petruchio keeps one comedy spinning within the other. Miss Morison is properly violent as the leading lady of the troupe and Katharine. Here, for a change, is a book of delight to carry the caparisons of a song and dance carnival.

There is an infinite variety in the proceedings. Miss Holm has devised syncopated ballets and stately dances to give "Kiss Me, Kate" terpsichorean distinction. There are specialty numbers, including one in which Fred Davis and Eddie Sledge join forces nimbly with Lang. Robert Russell Bennett has orchestrated the score knowingly to give the Porter songs a wide range of color. "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," for example, is no more than a turn in the sustained continuity of the production, but it is very funny. As for Ayers, he can take a double pat on the back for his meticulous production and his scintillating decor. "Kiss Me, Kate" is a splendid conclusion to the theatrical year.

NEW YORK STAR

January 2, 1949

by John Lardner

Of Sweet Kate and Mr. Porter

Mr. Cole Porter, the sweet singer of the Wabash, is tuneful and glib in two styles, his own and Shakespeare's, in *Kiss Me, Kate,* the new musical comedy which was presented at the Century Thursday night before a well-dressed detachment of the flower and chivalry of our town. What with fine, songs, good singing, dancing and playing, and a powerful source of inspiration (*The Taming of the Shrew*), his hybrid amounts to quite a show.

Having lost his grip on the letter "r" in his contact with alien culture, Mr. Porter is one of the few Indiana boys in the world who thinks that the city of Padua rhymes with "how mad you are" and "what a cad you are." However, our own racing handicapper pronounces his Christian name Clocka while spelling it Clocker, so who are we to cast the first dornick at the errant Hoosier song-writer?

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To get my carping out of the way early, I could wish that the book of *Kiss Me, Kate* by Bella and Samuel Spewack (pronounced Spewack) had been written with a little more attention to that indispensable element of musical comedy called comedy. Mixing their own stuff with Shakespeare's, the Spewacks make the old Swan sound like a pretty funny writer, which he was, at times. By contrast, their own humor struck me as routine and half-hearted. A good part of it consists, absolutely irrelevantly, of topical jokes about Washington politics which are just about adequate for use in a Cridiron Club show. And that is faint praise indeed.

Still, *The Taming of the Shrew* is a strong, bright, good-natured play, and *Kiss Me, Kate* apes it and intertwines with it so closely as to emerge, in the net, a bright, good-natured show strongly manned by bright, good-natured singers and dancers.

Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison lead the cast, in the parts of a divorced theatrical couple playing Petruchio and Katharine in a Baltimore tryout of the *Shrew*. Their characters, being modelled upon those of Mr. Shakespeare's sharp-tongued lovers, they toss their temperaments around pretty freely, mostly to music. In the course of the evening, Mr. Drake whacks Miss Morison across the buttocks so forcefully that it is touch and go, at the end, whether she will show up to finish the play or not. However, true love transcends her welts, and she does show up.

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That is about all the plot there is, except for a dice debt run up by a young actor (Harold Lang) which brings into the story a pair of underworld collection agents, of rudimentary comic appeal, by Thornton W. Burgess out of Damon Runyon. They hang around the theater and sing a patter song named *Brush Up Your Shakespeare*.

That brings us back, and high time, too, to Mr. Porter, who is by way of being the true star of the show, in spite of the fine singing and sprightly acting of Mr. Drake and Miss Morison, the nimble dancing of Mr. Lang, and a gracefully funny performance by Lisa Kirk. The composer has provided songs without stint. His score is a skillful and curious mixture of Shakespearian words, airs, and notions with standard Porter songs.

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The standard Porter songs, a very good collection of them, include *Always True to You (in My Fashion)*, which Miss Kirk handles in a nice Mary Martinesque style; *Bianca;* a dance number called *Too Darn Hot;* a torch song called *So in Love Am I;* and a parlor blues called *Why Can't You Behave?* Among the songs with a touch or more of Shakespeare in them are *I've Come to Wive It Wealthily in Padua, Were Thine That Special Face, Where Is the Life That Late I Led?,* and *I Am Ashamed That Women Are So Simple*. They are all fun to hear, and you get the impression that Mr. Porter had a lot of fun writing them.

Maybe he should have thought twice before he asked Mr. Drake to wonder, musically, where was Rebecca, his Becky-o, because you're afraid beforehand that the answer will end in "vecchio" (it's Ponte Vecchio). Some of the other rhymes are equally grotesque and foreseeable. But what are a few malformations among friends?

The Sun

DECEMBER 31, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

'Kiss Me, Kate' Is Terrific.

"Kiss Me, Kate" struck gold last night at the Century. This new and festive musical comedy is the best song-and-dance show of the season and one of the best Broadway has had in ten years. By the time these cheers get into print the box office queue will be reaching over into Central Park, and probably all the way to the reservoir.

"Kiss Me, Kate" has everything. Captivating music, jaunty and witty lyrics, magical dancing, an amiable book—and also bits of Shakespeare. Cole Porter has written an exuberant score; his lyrics are his best in a decade. Lemuel Ayers has distinguished himself with the scenery and costumes. The choreography of Hanya Holm is up to the finest we've had since Agnes deMille began asserting herself. John C. Wilson's fine direction gives the production extraordinary pace, and the company assembled by Saint Subber and Ayers could go on for special matinees of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and probably get away with it. Or even "Measure for Measure."

The libretto supplied by Bella and Samuel Spewack is of the play-within-a-play form, showing behind-the-scenes tempestuousness in the lives of a harried Shakespearen troupe, playing "The Taming of the Shrew" in Baltimore during a pre-Broadway tryout. The snatches of Shakespearean verse are delightful, verse that is integrated into the Spewack book, and all of us began to suspect last evening that Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison could go on as Petruchio and the stormy Kate most any afternoon.

Alfred Drake, playing an actor-director still in love with his divorced wife, who is also the leading woman of the company, is a winning player. He has robustness, humor, a communicable gayety and a definite romantic quality. Patricia Morison, back in the medium in which she started, gets co-starring billing with Drake and she is deserving of every bulb of it. Miss Morison is excitable, exciting and alive. She has a fine sense of comedy and a sense of timing. She has a show-stopping number in "I Hate Men" and Drake is fairly overpowering as he chants "I've Come to Wive it Wealthily in Padua," which is packed with Porter's keenest lyrics.

Lisa Kirk, to be remembered from "Allegro," has grace and freshness and style; she could have gone on for another hour with "Always True to You (In My Fashion)." Harry Clark and Jack Diamond, playing two jovial and stage-struck thugs, are enormously entertaining in their singing of "Brush Up Your Shakespeare." Harold Lang, as sprightly a dancer as seen hereabouts since Gene Kelly, sings and dances "Bianca" with relish and great skill. The "Too Darn Hot" number gets the second act off to a lively start, and the "Kiss Me, Kate" number closes the first act rousingly.

"Kiss Me, Kate" is a gay, bountiful and mettlesome show. "Edward, My Son" and "Anne of the Thousand Days" will now move over and make way for a new and thundering hit. The New York theater seemed pretty wonderful last night at the Century.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 31, 1948

'Kiss Me, Kate' a Hit; Gay, Beautiful, Funny

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Kiss Me Kate" is a show that strains a reviewer's supply of adjectives. It is gay, beautiful, tuneful, funny and plenty more. It Smoothly dovetails a modern counterpart of "The Taming of the Shrew" with a performance of Shakespere's classic done mostly in song and dance.

The show's most outstanding quality is its artful assurance, as everyone connected with it gives a superbly satisfactory contribution without suggesting that he has anywhere nearly exhausted his resources. As first class entertainment it is relaxing because it never strains. This temperance of delivery, at the Century Theater, is only possible in a musical where there is a wealth of expert talent, and that is just what "Kiss Me Kate" abounds in.

The production is designed so the scene shifts freely from the stage of a Baltimore theater to dressing rooms and backstage rehearsal rooms and passages. Fred is a loyal theater man who has hired his ex-wife Lilli, a temperamental movie star, to play Katherine to his Petruchio.

Cole Porter Scores.

When she finds him playing up to Lois, a night club artiste who is playing Bianca, Lilli's rage leads the two stars to commit mayhem on each other, on and off stage.

Lois' partner Bill, signs Fred's name on an IOU for a gambling debt, and the gangsters who come to collect from Fred are diverted by him to prevent Lilli from walking out on the show.

Cole Porter has turned out one of his all time best scores. It is studded with hits, has not a mediocre number in it, and offers line after line of those fabulously ticklish lyrics at which Porter at his best has no equal.

Here is a book by the Spewacks with which no one can quarrel, moving comically with the fullest support for song and dance. John C. Wilson keeps a complicated show sliding hitchlessly along and has toned the performance with a smooth ease that makes the rambunctious plot all the more effective.

Gowns Draw Gasps.

Lemuel Ayers, coproducer and designer, ignites the stage with glowing heady Italian colors. Particularly memorable are the deep purple sky behind a street scene, and a translucent curtain for a backstage interlude. The costumes are happily complimentary to the players, and at least two of Kate's flamboyant gowns drew gasps from the premiere audience.

Hanya Holm's dances are individual and effervescent, demanding great skill without ever suggesting a muscle flexing contest. They have the rare gift of making each dancer look as if he had a purpose in what he does. Tops is the insinuating routine for "Special Face."

Of the players, the most surprising is Patricia Morison, who has been known for some years only for her appearances in undistinguished pictures. Always a beauty, Miss Morison is these days ravishing. She is playing with a fire and wit hitherto unrevealed, and her voice is warm and free with an easy sweet range. Quite a girl and a talent to be contended with from here on.

Petruchio Cracks Whip.

Alfred Drake is unsurprisingly an ideal Petruchio with a confident swagger and a mature feeling for serious scenes.

He sings with warmth and cracks the whip over the story and the mood of the whole show.

As Bianca, Lisa Kirk reveals new stature and charm. Her rendition of the difficult legato line of "Why Can't You Behave" is little short of a triumph, and she stops the show with the racy lines of "Always True to You."

Harold Lang will probably look like a Cub Scout when he is 60, and his engaging youthfulness gives his lithe dancing the air of being done by a high fashion grasshopper. He is no slouch at singing either and does rewarding double duty with "Bianca."

Gangsters Get Culture.

Harry Clark and Jack Diamond are the amusingly obtuse gangsters getting culture, and come into their own toward the end with a contagious vaudeville routine which makes useful sacrilege of several dozen Shakespearean titles.

Nearly every number proved a stopper last night, and the score has remarkable variety. Most likely hit paraders are "So in Love" and "Why Can't You Behave," but there are many more like Kate's "I Hate Men," Petruchio's "I've Come to Wive It" and "Where Is the Life?", and Bianca's songs, that are natural special material for night club singers.

On leaving "Kiss Me Kate" you have a very pleasant feeling that Kate has complied.

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 31, 1948

'Kiss Me, Kate' Porter's Best, a Terrific Hit

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The new producing team of Saint Subber and Lemuel Ayers scored a rousing triumph last evening at the Century with "Kiss Me, Kate," a gorgeous satirical musical with score by Cole Porter and book by Bella and Samuel Spewack. It kept the first-nighters cheering wildly throughout the proceedings.

For the libretto, the Spewacks have used the device of a play within a play, as Maxwell Anderson did not so long ago in "Joan of Lorraine." They parallel a performance of Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew" with the riotous romance between an ex-husband and wife cast for the leads in it.

Personally, we think that Bill Shakespeare would love the parody on his tempestuous comedy, that he would admire the fine showmanship that has gone into its creation.

Porter's score is, to our way of thinking, perhaps his best to date. There isn't a "filler" in it. The lyrics are clever, and the music something to make a Puritan want to start shuffling his feet in rhythm.

John C. Wilson has staged the production with admirable taste and skill and Hanya Holm, who can strike a serious note in a concert hall, has provided choreography that should be a joy for jitterbugs. As for the settings and costumes by Lemuel Ayers—they are superlative.

Subber and Ayers also merit a sweeping bow for their casting of the festive piece Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison act and sing the warring romantics with fire, persuasiveness and authority.

Lisa Kirk had the smart first-nighters blistering their distinguished palms over her delivery of Porter torch songs that should be consoling and amusing heartbroken stay-up-lates for many a bistro morn. The white-tied and be-ermined customers demanded encore after encore of "Why Can't You Behave" and "Always True to You."

Harold Lang, graduate of Ballet Theatre, not only has become an ingratiating actor but also a first-rate hot hoofer. He and Miss Holm's spirited corps-de-danse step with winning precision and verve. Harry Clark and Jack Diamond click with a musical-comedy burlesque of gambling den gangsters. Others deserving salutes are Thomas Hoier, Annabelle Hill, Lorenzo Fuller, Denis Green, Fred Davis and Eddie Sledge.

Take our advice and rush to the Century box-office immediately.

"The Rape of Lucretia"

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

DECEMBER 30, 1948

By Howard Barnes

Strictly an Opera

Stylized and stately tableaux make for a minimum of dramatic excitement in "The Rape of Lucretia," the music drama which has come to the Ziegfeld Theater. Ronald Duncan's libretto has even less action and stage meaning than Thornton Wilder's adaptation of Andre Obey's "Le Viol de Lucrece," in which Katherine Cornell starred some seasons ago. He has plodded through the familiar chronicle of a ravished Roman matron in 509 B. C. painstakingly, bringing in a male and a female historical commentator to suggest some sort of connection between Tarquinius's dark deed and Christian faith. He has quite failed to give the tale theatrical tension, or even interest.

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The best that can be said for this invasion of one medium by another is the fact that it has been munificently decorated. The settings by the British painter, John Piper, which were brought from abroad for the production, are striking and functional. It is only a pity that they contain so little significant movement and color. "The Rape of Lucretia" is strictly an opera. Virgil Thomson assays it as such in an adjoining column. Never for a moment has it the pulse and vigor which characterized such music dramas as Mr. Thompson's "Four Saints in Three Acts," "The Medium" and "The Telephone," or "Carmen Jones."

Duncan has split his action into four scenes. The poetic tragedy opens in the general's tent outside Rome where Tarquinius becomes jealous of Collatinus and his faithful wife and then moves through Lucretia's defiled house. For the most part the backdrops are merely handsome scenic arrangements for posturing and nervous walks and runs across the stage. Agnes deMille has given the work pictorial quality in her staging, but she has not made it consequential, even in the rape scene. As for the acting, it is less conventional than you will find in most opera, with Kitty Carlisle and George Tozzi taking the leading roles in Wednesday nights presentation. It still lacks persuasion. Music without a play is the best way to describe "The Rape of Lucretia."

By Virgil Thomson

Thoroughly Silly

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S "Rape of Lucretia" suffers, as a musical composition, from libretto trouble. But before going into that, let us give production excellences their due. John Pipers scenery and costumes, designed in the Parisian Jean Hugo taste and imported from England, were Wednesday nights chief delight for this consumer. Agnes de Milles stage direction was another, though more for giving one to imagine what she could have done with modern dance-style pantomime in an opera less wandering in its narration. The orchestra, under Paul Breisach, played well, too, and gave, thanks to Britten's imaginative scoring, both variety and volume, though the musicians required are only eleven in number.

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The singing at the Ziegfeld is in general pleasing, with voices neatly matched for size, and all the artists taking care to project words. The beautiful voice of Brenda Lewis, as the Female Chorus, is the most striking, though unfortunately often a shade flat as to pitch. George Tozzi, who sings Tarquinius, has a fine, rich baritone that makes one sit up and listen. Kitty Carlisle, the Lucretia, is adequate vocally but no more. Marguerite Piazza, who sings Lucia, one of Lucretia's handmaidens, has a pretty voice and a pretty way of keeping herself visible at all times. The rest of the cast is good but less distinguished.

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The opera has two good numbers—a tenor solo describing, with orchestral aid, a horseback ride and the swimming of a river; and a flower duet for alto and soprano. There is an agreeable ladies' trio also. The rest of the piece is recitative unsupported by harmonic or thematic progression. It doesn't get anywhere musically, because there isn't enough music to hold the ear. The composer, wishing apparently to let the literary text stand out, has left the whole responsibility of dramatic animation to the words of the play; and these have no life in them.

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Ronald Duncan's text has literary ambitions but no style or concentration. It is pompous, wandering and incredibly garrulous. Its theme is that rape requires co-operation from the raped and is therefore a form of unchastity. Also, unchastity, it seems, justifies suicide. It is all thoroughly silly and without reality, even as the enacting of an historic legend. Nobody could have written living music to such halting lines. Whether Britten really tried I am not sure. Certainly he has failed to offer a score of sufficient intrinsic interest to hold a two-hour show together. And since the libretto cannot do this either, all we have at the Ziegfeld is a stylish production. The rest is water and none too clean.

'THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA.'

THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA, a music drama in two acts. Music by Benjamin Britten and book by Ronald Duncan. Staged by Agnes de Mille; scenery and costumes designed by John Piper; musical director and conductor, Paul Breisach; lighting by Peggy Clark; vocal director, John Daggett Howell; costume supervision, Frank Thompson; presented by Marjorie and Sherman Ewing and Giovanni Cardelli. At the Ziegfeld Theatre.

Male Chorus	Edward Kane
Female Chorus	Brenda Lewis
Collatinus	Holger Sorensen
Junius	Emile Renan
Tarquinius	George Tozzi
Lucretia	Kitty Carlisle
Bianca	Vivian Bauer
Lucia	Marguerite Piazza
Roman Woman	Lidija Franklin
Two Etruscan Soldiers	Kasimir Kokic, Lucas Hoving
Roman Man	Robert Pagani
Roman Youth	Stanley Simmons
A Prostitute	Monty Kelley

New York Post

DECEMBER 30, 1948

'The Rape of Lucretia' A Disguised Opera

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

In any strict departmentalization of the arts, "The Rape of Lucretia," which opened at the Ziegfeld last night, would come under the head of music, rather than theatre. Although the producers label it a "music drama," it is nothing more or less than an opera in English that the young British composer, Benjamin Britten, has written to the accompaniment of a text by Ronald Duncan. Since, however, the various artistic forms seem to be running together these days, the work will here be discussed by a drama reviewer notorious for his suspicion of sericus music.

Despite my baleful approach to opera and the fact that I was virtually seated on top of the kettledrum last night, I found "The Rape of Lucretia" almost steadily interesting as musical theatre. It is, I think, more lively, vigorous and provocative than brilliant and more promising than successful. But it is always alive and frequently striking, and, in Kitty Carlisle, who has the leading role in the evening performances, it offers a lyric actress who not only sings the part attractively but can act it touchingly.

When accused of being hostile to modern attempts at opera, I always bring up in rebuttal my enthusiasm for Virgil Thomson's "Four Saints in Three Acts," for which Gertrude Stein wrote the enchanting lyrics. That, I am convinced, is a really delightful and wholly successful work of art. Taking it as my standard of excellence, I would say that "The Rape of Lucretia," in its considerably different but at least fairly parallel field—both of them are unconventionally contemporary approaches to opera—is certainly its inferior.

Nor is its book an entirely happy one. Mr. Duncan seems to have followed Andre Obey's play on the subject with some fidelity, and his text has the advantage of being direct and unpretentious. But it is lacking in lyric beauty and is about as poetic as Maxwell Anderson, which some may take as a neat compliment. Nor does its effort to invest the tragedy of the Roman matron, who was assaulted by the Etruscan tyrant, with philosophical point and overtones of Christian mysticism, work out with any notable success.

Some Virtues

Yet, while the book is fairly routine and Mr. Britten's music struck me as less than triumphant, I think "The Rape of Lucretia" indicates that the young composer is a man deserving of the attention he has received. He has vigor, imagination and freshness of approach, and those are qualities to be cherished in as moribund an art form as opera frequently appears to be becoming. The new music drama is at its most effective when the action is in pantomime to the accompaniment of the narrative sung by the chorus, and then it is sometimes very good indeed.

The production is pleasantly simple and effective. John Piper's sets are particularly good, and Agnes de Mille's staging has vivacity and dignity. As I have noted, Miss Carlisle is extremely helpful as Lucretia, and so is Brenda Lewis as the female side of the chorus. The men's roles are properly sung, if not brilliantly acted. "The Rape of Lucretia" may be opera disguised as music drama, but as such it has its points.

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 30, 1948

'The Rape of Lucretia' Is Interesting as Opera

By ROBERT COLEMAN

No matter what you think of "The Rape of Lucretia," which Marjorie and Sherman Ewing and Giovanni Cardelli brought to the Ziegfeld Theatre last evening, it is likely to prove the most provocative item of the 1948-1949 season. The program describes it as "a music drama," with book by Ronald Duncan and music by Benjamin Britten.

Perhaps "music drama" is used in the Wagnerian sense, which would class the new arrival as an opera. But is it? At times, yes. At other times it seems a static play with incidental music. Anyway, it is a startling, sometimes brilliant and sometimes boring, musical stunt.

The Britten music is often exciting, though it is too seldom really singable. The task of the performers is made doubly difficult by the Duncan libretto, for the poet uses high-faluting wordage that fairly defies a vocalist to phrase it musically.

The best singing of the evening, we thought, was contributed by Edward Kane and Brenda Lewis, as the male and female chorus. Kitty Carlisle was admirably dramatic in the title role, which emphasizes recitative rather than aria. Miss Carlisle is indeed fortunate in having less real singing to do than most of her confreres.

Marguerite Piazza, who has a delightful voice, used it as skilfully as circumstances permitted. Emile Renan, George Tozzi and Holger Sorensen did well by other roles. Vivian Bauer appeared to have a bad throat.

By the evening's end, we were open to the opinion that Lucretia, most chaste of Roman matrons, had been ravished, overpowered less by Tarquinius than by repetitive, pretentious debate. When Duncan falls in love with a word or a phrase, he repeats it until it thuds to the floor from exhaustion.

Though you will have to look into the back of your program to discover it, John Piper designed the magnificent production, which, for our money, is the hit of the evening. The Piper sets are nothing less than stunning. And speaking of hits, Agnes deMille's staging of the music drama is superb. Piper and deMille have combined to give us one of the most effective and stirring pictorial masterpieces of our time.

A salute also is due conductor Paul Breisach and his orchestra of twelve virtuosi. At subsequent performances, there will be alterations of casts to meet the demands of the Britten score.

Personally, we think "The Rape of Lucretia" should be typed as opera. And, as opera, it is an interesting though minor work. We'll take Wagner or the mature Verdi, if given a choice. It is definitely not for playgoers attuned to the melodies of Rombreg, Rodgers or Cole Porter.

The Ewings and Cardelli are to be complimented for giving us the opportunity to hear this musical tour de force, though it is not likely to prove a profitable venture. We would not have missed seeing and hearing it for anything. But, honestly, once is enough.

NEW YORK STAR

DECEMBER 31, 1948

by Robert A. Hague

Beauty Without Excitement

As spoken, sung, acted and danced at the Ziegfeld Theater, the antique Roman story of the chaste Lucretia and her ravishment by the Etruscan Prince, Tarquinius, has been transformed into a modern theater piece of rare quality and design, if one lacking in substance and limited in appeal. Whether it be called "music drama" or opera, the simpler and more correct term, this *Rape of Lucretia*, penned by Ronald Duncan and set to music by Benjamin Britten, has been raimented in beauty by John Piper, put in graceful motion by Agnes de Mille and performed by a generally admirable cast.

If it is a good deal less than a masterpiece, if it fails to stir the blood or deeply touch the heart—and those are charges which legitimately may be brought against it—the fault stems more from the libretto than from the score, and least of all from the production. And whatever its failings and weaknesses, one can take pleasure in the fact that it is uncommonly beautiful to look at, often alerts the ear and sometimes engages the mind.

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Mr. Duncan's libretto, based on Andre Obey's play, *Le Viol de Lucrece*, tells Lucretia's tragic story partly in spoken dialogue and partly in dumbshow, framing its action with two commentators, a

Male and a Female Chorus, who look upon it with Christian eyes, supply it with historical, philosophical and moral commentary, and often voice the thoughts of the characters themselves. Its attempt to give Christian significance to a pagan story seems only to confuse the issue and weaken its essential drama. The style and manner of its telling, too, lessens its impact and stultifies the very human tragedy inherent in the legend. It is couched in language of considerable literary pretension which, though often apt and sometimes striking in its poetic imagery, mixes simplicity and sophistication disaffectingly, and is seldom truly vital or eloquent in effect.

In implementing this text with music, Mr. Britten has been infinitely skillful and inventive, but he has been unable to give it more than passing life and fitful power. Using an orchestra of only 12 instruments, he has set the words with great care, underlining them musically but never obscuring them so that they cannot be heard —which is sometimes a pity. Mostly, and of necessity, his score is a series of monochromatic and unmelodic recitatives. What opportunities there are for arias, duets and ensemble numbers, he makes good use of, providing music of considerable lyricsism and expressivity. Most notable of these are the Male Chorus' tenor aria describing Tarquinius' ride to Rome, the trio in Lucretia's house as the women fold and put away the linen, Tarquinius' baritone aria as he awakens the sleeping Lucretia, the second-act duet of Lucia and Bianca as they arrange the flowers, and the final elegiac ensemble after Lucretia has killed herself.

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The music for the most part is very well sung, especially by Edward Kane and Brenda Lewis, who as the Male and Female Chorus have the most taxing assignments. Though she is not quite right for the role, and fails to give it much depth and strength, Kitty Carlisle is lovely to look at as Lucretia, and sings her music pleasingly. George Tozzi is a believable Tarquinius and uses his fine, rich baritone with dramatic effect. Emile Renan registers well as the ambitious and conniving Junius, and Holger Sorensen is adequate as Lucretia's husband, the blameless Collatinus. Marguerite Piazza and Vivian Bauer are excellent as Lucretia's two maid-servants. And the picked group of instrumentalists play commendably under Paul Breisach's direction.

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But, most of all, it is Miss de Mille's direction that lends high quality and distinction to the evening. She has filled the stage with graceful and expressive movement, which is formalized and often balletic in character; and, with the help of Mr. Piper's evocative scenery and costumes, has composed some unforgettable stage pictures.

Broadway has done a much better job with Britten's *Rape of Lucretia* than the Metropolitan did last season with his *Peter Grimes*. Unfortunately, *Lucretia* hasn't the substance, the power or the theatrical impact *Grimes* has. It is beautiful but a little dumb.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 30, 1948

Britten's 'Rape of Lucretia,' With Kitty Carlisle, Opens at the Ziegfeld—Agnes de Mille Director

By OLIN DOWNES

Opera, in the truly modern sense of the word, blossomed last night on Broadway. The effect of the production of "The Rape of Lucretia" in the Ziegfeld Theatre was as revolutionary as it was exhilarating. The text of Ronald Duncan is not only singable, despite certain artificialities and some high-falutin,' but is an effective dramatic vehicle. The score is far and away the most mature, flexible and distinguished composing that Benjamin Britten has yet done for the lyric theatre. It runs thin in places, but is never inexpert; at climactic moments it supplies the indispensable atmosphere and stimulus.

Then we come to the casting, the stage direction and the superbly unified elements of the presentation. There was a cast, singularly well-appointed, of which the members were not only personable to the eye, but capable of intelligent acting as well as of song. There was not a bad voice in the lot. There were several exceptional ones. Vocal virtuosity, where it was appropriate, was not lacking. The orchestra of twelve players gave a finished performance under Paul Breisach. The settings and costumes, creations of John Piper, were simple yet rich in color and imaginative suggestion.

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The stage direction was by a dancer, Agnes de Mille. In her stylized groupings and pantomimes she made an effect singularly appropriate to the subject, if perhaps we accept the superfluous activity of the male and female proponents of the Greek chorus, who in the original production of the opera at Glyndebourne remained in their niches at each side of the stage, always apart from the action, reading from the book of fate as the drama went on its way.

The Duncan treatment of the tale made universal by bards as ancient as Livy and Shakespeare is conspicuous for the part that is played by the jealous and embittered Junius, furious in his humiliation at the hands of his own wife, bent, as a sort of miniature Iago, on striking Collatinus to the heart by the revelation of Lucretia's undoing.

Mr. Renan had the voice with the necessary mettle and hardness for this sardonic role, which he drove home by his acting. Mr. Sorensen's Collatinus is rather heavy weather, and admirably sung. Mr. Tozzi's Tarquinius, the central male figure, was both brutal and intense. His vocalism and his dramatic declamation fully realized the situations. The climax of the opera, its finest music, its best drama too, is the scene of the catastrophe in Lucretia's bed chamber. We cannot imagine it carried better, with more dramatic force, yet dignity and line as the scene swept to its climax.

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Here is where Mr. Britten's score reaches its greatest height, in the establishment of the mood while Lucretia sleeps and evil Tarquinius creeps near, starting at every sound, at last revealing himself and his wild passion. And how admirable, here and all through, was Miss Carlisle, beautiful in her plastic; rich-voiced, tragical in the color of the tones, as well as the treatment of the text. A figure like Niobe at the end.

For a foil there was the delicious bravura of the coloratura soprano, the maid Lucia, Miss Piazzi played, sang and frolicked through the role with sheer virtuosity. By her side was Miss Bauer's Bianca, sung so well and so perfectly in the picture. The ensemble of women's voices in the house of Lucretia was a high moment of the score and the performance.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 30, 1948

'Lucretia' Is Physically Colorful Opera, But Has Many Dramatic Drawbacks

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Since the "Rape of Lucretia" is so essentially operatic its true evaluation must rest with the music department, and we will confine our comments to its aspects as musical theater.

This production is plainly a labor of love, because the work is by no means an obvious subject for the regular commercial theater. Its essential formality often makes the introduction of action very difficult, and brilliant as the music may be, it is not likely to be widely popular until it has become familiar.

The work as it is staged now makes superhuman demands on the players.

To present "Lucretia" ideally, the principals should have voices of operatic caliber, be good enough dancers to move and pose with plastic effect, and also be inspired actors. The reason for this is that all the effects, vocal, visual or emotional, must be conveyed to the audience quickly. The work runs only two hours but its emotion and philosophy are intense, and there is seldom much time spent in building up to any peak.

The play tells the legend of the virtuous Lucretia, wife of a Roman general, who is the only woman in Rome who has remained faithful to her husband while the men are at war.

After a drinking session in

camp, Junius grows wildly jealous of Lucretia's husband. He venomously suggests to Tarquinius, a Prince of the Etruscan conquerors of Rome and a confirmed lecher, that he can only satisfy his reputation if he wins Lucretia. Stirred up, Tarquinius rides back to Rome and attacks the virtuous woman.

Lucretia kills herself for her feeling of guilt. The moral implication of her motive intensifies the woman's spirit, because her sense of having sinned is foreign to the moral tenets of the world she lives in, half a century before the birth of Christ.

Kitty Carlisle plays the central figure, a particularly difficult role because it is so important and so economically constructed. She has dignity and bearing but sometimes seems too cool and aloof for even such a virtuous woman.

No one in the cast has more intensity or brooding grandeur than Brenda Lewis as the female chorus, and Edward Kane is similarly effective as her counterpart. They both convey inner concern.

Music Lacks Usual Britten Inspiration

By ROBERT BAGAR.

Perhaps, the most obvious thing to say about Benjamin Britten's "The Rape of Lucretia" is that the libretto by Ronald Duncan is not an ideal one at all. It has its moments, though, when the text combines with the music and the stage action to create a dramatic situation all around, but these are rare.

Most of all the book suffers from a kind of epic detachment from anything like naturalness. It is worded most impersonally and in the grandiose manner, to boot. It is overweighted by its own imagery and seems to have provided the composer with not much more than a temptation to place the would-be significant lines into separate and distinct shrines of their own. Thus, because of that, we have an almost total lack of dramatic unity.

In this emulated bardic, coldly remote atmosphere it is a wonder that Britten has composed even occasionally music that is interesting by itself. For certainly the inspiration has been piecemeal.

The small orchestra called for, playing well under the direction of Paul Breisach (who also accompanied the recitatives on the piano), has the advantage of a rather limpid orchestration, which is in its high points exceedingly effective.

Brenda Lewis, as the Female Chorus, was the chief vocal feature of the evening. Also especially good vocally was George Tozzi as Tarquinius. The others, all well trained, sang their parts creditably, and Kitty Carlisle, as Lucretia, gave more than a semblance of characterization in the variety of her singing.

Last, but certainly not least, John Piper's set and costumes, made available by courtesy of the English Opera Group, are altogether first rate.

Journal American

DECEMBER 30, 1948

Critic-on-Limb Lauds Betrayal With Music

By ROBERT GARLAND

To his own personal opera house at Sixth Avenue and 54th Street, Billy Rose, the Metropolitan's worst friend and severest critic, has admitted Benjamin Britten's "The Rape of Lucretia" as the operatic replacement of Heitor Villa-Lobos' "Magdalena." The newcomer has the better libretto.

Marjorie and Sherman Ewing, angels of "Angel in the Wings," have taken on Giovanni Cardelli as co-producer. And their joint production at the Ziegfeld is the second—perhaps the third—of "The Rape of Lucretia" in America. For, thanks to Mr. Cardelli, Chicago has seen it. Hollywood too, maybe.

Coincidently, Mr. Villa-Lobos' title girl, Magdalena, and Mr. Britten's title girl, Lucretia, are good girls who are not done exactly right by. But while Magdalena escapes what once was worse-than-death in modern South America, Lucretia is disastrously not done right by in ancient Rome. You know the legend!

For purposes of his libretto, Benjamin Britten had a number of Lucretia's biographers to choose from. Livy or Tacitus. Francois Ponsard or William Shakespeare. George Rivers or Andre Obey. Andre Obey's is the biography Ronald Duncan, the accredited librettist, has wisely chosen.

Katharine Cornell dealt with it in a translation by Thornton Wilder, with music by Deems Taylor. The year, 1932. The run, scanty.

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Stark Simplicity

It so happens—unwisely, it seems to me—that Mr. and Mrs. Ewing and Mr. Cardelli, with Leo Freedman and June Greenwall, their public relations duo, invited my report on their "The Rape of Lucretia." This leaves our rightful music-man to contradict me later on. Miles Kastendieck will, believe me!

Meanwhile, looking at Benjamin Britten's importation as a show, a play, as The Theatre Guild would say, with music, I admire it. Listening in Billy Rose's personal opera house, I wonder if, after all these years, Mr. Britten is not destined to bring English opera back to the high estate it enjoyed under Henry Purcell.

While not Elizabethan in *form* or harmonic content, the young English composer's musical interpretation of the bewilderment, bewitchment and betrayal of Collatinus' noble wife has the same stark simplicity of, say, "Dido and Aeneas." This once more is English opera, as well as opera in English.

The harmonic structure is, however, definitely, modern. And the device of the Choruses—taken from the Andre Obey play so grudgingly credited in the programs—is tremendously effective. Not only in the way it solves certain dramatic problems, but also because it affords lovely and important music . . .

To me, a musical amateur in the more kindly meaning of the term, Mr. Britten's is a significant, fulsome and fascinating score.

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Carlisle Notable

Throughout, the music is projected to its best—or almost best—advantage. As the Male and Female Chorus, Edward Kane and Brenda Lewis are what the composer wanted. Especially in the impressive peroration which concludes the opera, a disturbing dirge-like finale in which the old Roman legend is crossed with Christianity.

In the triangular story of the play with music, Kitty Carlisle, as the Lucretia who is not done right by; George Tozzi as Tarquinius, the villain who pursues her, and Holger Sorensen as Collatinus, the wronged Lucretia's unhappy husband, are notable. To her vocal ability, Miss Carlisle adds the art of acting.

The production, including an orchestra under Paul Breisach, is of considerable distinction. The scenery and costumes, secretly credited to Englishman John Piper, are scenically pictorial. Almost as scenically pictorial as those brought over for "The Madwoman of Chaillot." Agnes de Mille's direction is but slightly Oklahoman.

At Saturday and Sunday matinees, the more-sinned-against-than-usual Roman lady of the title will be taken over by Beba Kibler. Miss Kibler sang Lucretia in Chicago at the American premiere of the Benjamin Britten opera. Mr. Kane, as the Male Chorus, Marguerite Piazza, as Lucia, are also "Rape of Lucretia" American originals . . .

To a Broadway drama-critic out on a limb, this first New York production of the Benjamin Britten "music drama" looks like a grand, not-too-grand grand opera. Honestly, I could sit through it again!

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 30, 1948

'The Rape of Lucretia' a Notable Adventure in the Field of Opera

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Rape of Lucretia," which Marjorie and Sherman Ewing and Giovanni Cardelli ventured to present last evening at the Ziegfeld Theatre, is a notable operatic experiment done notably well. After one hearing—which frankly isn't enough—I am unwilling to say flatly that it is a notable opera. It most certainly is a lesson in staging for the traditionalists who work at the Metropolitan Opera House, and, no matter what its own success may be, it should be memorable as a suggestion of what can be done on a modern operatic stage.

There is nothing new, really, about "The Rape of Lucretia." Opera has always been a striving for the perfect combination of story, song and spectacle. Here the arts of music, poetry and theatre are blended—and this is just what "The Rape of Lucretia" seeks to do.

But the arts change; dissonance has become beautiful in music, verse has become less fancy, and the dramatic stage is now almost completely divorced from the old romantic style. Standard operas are the one link with the past that remains in the modern theatre. Sooner or later this link will be broken and something great and new will be freed. Since "The Rape of Lucretia" is at least a tug at this link, it is notable.

The Best Moments.

The score is by Benjamin Britten, the young Englishman. The book is by Ronald Duncan, British poet. The staging is by Agnes de Mille, American choregrapher. The settings are by John Piper, English artist. The acting and singing are by a generally able American company.

These elements of opera—music, story, movement, spectacle and performance—hang together remarkably well. There are many moments of beauty and excitement in this new production at the Ziegfeld Theatre, and I felt last evening that their potentialities had not always been fully realized.

The legend of Lucretia is heroic because it is simple and is therefore fine material for an opera. In the dissolute Rome of 600 years before Christ, Lucretia is unique—a faithful and loving wife. Collatinus, too, is unique—a loving and faithful husband. When Tarquinius ravishes Lucretia out of sheer jealousy of such purity and devotion, she kills herself.

Unemotional Music.

Here is a scenario of great, heroic proportions—but Mr. Britten and Mr. Duncan have not sought to be great and heroic about it. They have deliberately held themselves from cutting loose. Mr. Duncan's libretto is a work of intelligence and grace and Mr. Britten's score illuminates it interestingly and inventively—but not tunefully. It seems to me that Mr. Britten was so intent upon embellishing Mr. Duncan's verse, line by line, that he failed to create any passages of music having sustained emotional power.

Mr. Piper's settings, brought here from England, are dramatic and beautiful. Miss de Mille's direction makes the opera a graceful and interesting affair to watch, and her staging of the scene of ravishment and the suicide of Lucretia is fine creative work.

Will Alternate Casts.

Last evening's company included Kitty Carlisle as Lucretia, Emile Renan as Junius, Holger Sorensen as Collatinus, George Tozzi as Tarquinius, Marguerite Piazzo as Lucia and Vivian Bauer as Bianca. Doing excellent work vocally and pictorially were Edward Kane and Brenda Lewis as the male and female choruses. Miss Carlisle was lovely and sufficiently tragic, but I think there is enough in her role to be worthy of a great dramatic singer, if such a one is ever born again. Mr. Tozzi's Tarquinius and Miss Piazza's Lucia were, for me, the most satisfying performances.

At varying times, for which consult the advertisements, other singers will alternate with some of the principals who appeared last evening.

The Sun

DECEMBER 30, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Opera at the Ziegfeld.

The operatic phases of "The Rape of Lucretia," which opened last night at the Ziegfeld Theater, are being examined herewith by the Music Department, uncommonly expert in such matters, and I am left merely with the duty of considering, and reporting upon, the portions of the new production that might be considered rightfully within the province of the Drama Desk. So be it.

Actually, dramatic critics were out of bounds at the Ziegfeld last night, and had no more business in being in the Avenue of the Americas than Music would have had in attending the premiere of "Life With Mother." But the sponsors of "Lucretia," Marjorie and Sherman Ewing and Giovanni Cardelli, estimable people, apparently wanted coverage by all departments from Antiques to House and Garden. Drama now duly co-operates.

Dramatically, "The Rape of Lucretia" is a fable of the Romans and the Etruscans, of love and lust and violence, of self-sacrifice and death. It's a story simple in the telling in the libretto of Ronald Duncan. The fair and virtuous Lucretia, wife of the Roman general, Collatinus, is violated by Tarquinius, an Etruscan prince. Lucretia summons Collatinus, makes announcement of her grief and shame, and stabs herself to death.

"The Rape of Lucretia," as placed upon the stage of the Ziegfeld, achieves a pictorial beauty in the imaginative and distinctive settings of John Piper, the English painter, who did the scenery for the Old Vic's "Oedipus." The production has been given movement, vigor and spirit in the staging of Agnes DeMille. The backgrounds of Piper, plus the lighting of Peggy Clark, plus Miss DeMille's sprightly direction tend to bring a certain exultation to the so-called music drama.

Comment on the singing of the principals, on the score of Benjamin Britten and on the musical direction of Paul Breisach, is left to the more expert Mr. K., but let the observation be made that Kitty Carlisle, in the role of the anguished and ravished Lucretia, is arresting and impressive, theatrically and dramatically—a figure of chastity and dignity and nobility in the beginning and one of remorse, humiliation and tragedy after Tarquinius has fled.

So, under the label of music-drama, but as an outright opera, nevertheless, a classical legend is now restored to the New York stage. It was last done here sixteen years ago when Katharine Cornell appeared as Lucrece in Thornton Wilder's translation of the original of Andre Obey. . . . The Music Department will now take over.

Whatever value "Lucretia" has in the theater must surely be in terms of its music, which is the dominating element of the present production, and the fundamental excuse for its presentation. By common standards of operatic performance in New York the cast directed by Paul Breisach did a remarkable job with a score that is never easy to sing and often hard to speak, that has some memorable high spots—such as the ride of Tarquinius in the first act and the following scene in the home of Lucretia—plus much pointless declamation and fancy setting of a flossy text.

Britten's gifts as a writer of vivid musical imagery, as a painter of tonal moods, are all over the score, especially in the first act where the situation is straightforward and progressive. But the elaborations that follow, the staginess of the rape itself demand a kind of melodramatic drive that Britten does not command. Perhaps a stronger singer than Miss Carlisle would have made more of Lucretia's music, but she added enough, in appearance and acting, to make the deficiency Britten's.

The music-minded will appreciate the tour de force involved in the composer's utilization of a small orchestra to deliver the excitement and variety usually associated with a big one; there are passages of striking originality and strength, nevertheless. But the wordy, self-conscious text is a severe liability, both to the composer's imagination and the listener's ear. To me, "Lucretia" proves that Britten can write a stageworthy opera with chamber orchestra, given a better book than Duncan's.

IRVING KOLODIN.

"Don't Listen, Ladies"

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 29, 1948

M. Guitry's 'Don't Listen, Ladies' Seems to Be Pretty Good Advice

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The French are not particularly noted for the manufacture of durable goods. The clothes they make for women are the prettiest, but the thread which holds them together won't last for more than two sittings. Their telephones hardly ever work. Their one manufactured product which has stood a couple of generations of wear and tear without noticeable deterioration is the sex comedy. The French have built a vast industry out of jokes about beds and mistresses, and the latest model is Sacha Guitry's "Don't Listen, Ladies," which was presented last evening at the Booth Theatre.

"Don't Listen, Ladies" is the same old thing—standard epigrams about the fickleness of women and the eternal quest of the male for the bluebird of happiness. In this type of play people are stylish and rich. The males distrust the females and vice versa and the overnight accomodations are subject to change without notice. In the end, of course, somebody loves somebody long enough for the stagehand to get the curtain down and to send the audience to—he hopes—their proper homes.

A Choice of Wives.

In "Don't Listen, Ladies" Jack Buchanan is married to Moira Lister but he used to be married to Adele Dixon. When Moira doesn't come home one night on account of being stuck in a busted Ferris wheel, Jack becomes suspicious of her. Adele, sensing this old and indestructible Gallic suspicion, tries to move back in. After sniffing a leftover bottle of Moira's perfume Jack decides that it is Moira he loves after all—but he doesn't trust her too much even when the curtain is coming down.

After a good, modern French play by Jean Giraudoux, "The Madwoman of Chaillot," it is quite difficult to have patience with Guitry's tired old prank. Last evening I did admire Mr. Buchanan's crisp comedy style and his beautifully tailored presence, but that wasn't enough to keep me in a theatre for a couple of hours except that I happened to be working. Verdi's "La Donna e Mobile" is shorter and prettier.

The setting of "Don't Listen, Ladies" is, by the way, the shop of an antique dealer. I think his name is Guitry.

'DON'T LISTEN, LADIES.'

Play by Sacha Guitry; translated by Stephen Powys; staged by Willard Sticker; setting by Leon Davey; presented by Lee Ephraim and Jack Buchanan at the Booth Theater Tuesday evening, December 28, 1948. The cast:

Daniel Barbelet	Jack Buchanan
Henriette	Joan Seton
Madeleine	Moira Lister
Baron de Charcenay	Hugh Miller
Blandinet	Ian Lubbock
Julie Bille-en-Bois	Ivy St. Heller
Valentine	Adele Dixon
A Porter	Bartlett Mullins
Michel Aubrion	Austin Trevor

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place at Daniel Barbelet's antique shop in Paris: Act. I.—Monday morning. Act II.—Friday afternoon.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 29, 1948

'Don't Listen, Ladies' Opens at the Booth

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

New York theater audiences have had a number of chances in the past year to study adaptations from the French drama, and the latest of these, "Don't Listen, Ladies," takes the least study or concentration of all to understand.

Briefly it is a bedroom farce played in an antique shop. It has one of those whirlaround plots once thought sophisticated, about a man with both a current and an ex-wife, and devotes itself to their mutual suspicions of infidelity. Everyone who comes on stage converses in maxims, well enough phrased but never original.

There is a great deal of frank talk about sex, usually through the medium of comparing the mating habits of insects, birds or pagan gods with humans, all without taste or wit. You often feel that this sort of classy banter about packaged love might still get by in the light glitter of the French language. In English it is heavy handed, and its weight is increased by peculiarly British slang which often makes lumpy dialogue for American ears.

The Tables Turned.

Daniel is the chic antique dealer who really loves his wife, Madeleine, but dislikes her habit of staying out all night even when she insists she was caught at the top of a broken down Ferris wheel. She turns the tables on him on the strength of an old love letter she has found, and he brings on his first wife, Valentine, to prove how old the epistle really is.

From there on it is every man for himself, and every woman. Madeleine moves out and gets herself a beau. Valentine moves in. And an old friend of Daniel straightens everything out.

Julie, the old friend, is the most interesting character in the play. A dancer, she was once the mistress of the then very youthful Daniel, and she now has nothing left in the world but a portrait Toulouse-Lautrec once painted of her.

She comes to Daniel to sell the picture, and remains to repair his marriage.

Engaging Players.

The idea of the title comes from Daniel's opening soliloquy on the perfidy of women. Later there are occasions when he and his wife address themselves again to the audience. They have nothing to say to the paying customers direct that is much more engaging than what they say to each other, although it is less rude.

Perhaps opening night excitement might account for the way in which the company started pouncing on the slender if indelicate lines and situations of the play. It took more than an act last night to realize that this was in fact a company of very engaging players, instead of a group of ravenous actors chewing up a play at top speed.

Jack Buchanan is dry and graceful and sharp as Daniel. His dominance of the play is modest as befits the character who is quite constantly behind the eight ball.

As his wives, there are a pair of good looking and most handsomely constructed ladies in Moira Lister and Adele Dixon. Miss Lister is game for showgirl competition from her first entrance, and Miss Dixon quickly changes her tailored suit and horned rims to join her in the rivalry.

Ivy St. Heller is deft and expert as possible as the crisp, wise old dancer. Austin Trevor is appreciably typical in the old school tie role of the "do it now boy" whom Madeleine acquires, and Hugh Miller has convincing charm as a polished customer with a roving eye.

Too often the conversational aphorisms fall flat in a fashion unexpected from original Sacha Guitry dialogue, and only rarely have the potent phraseology of the childless Julie's statement that she has "dropped the torch that has passed from hand to hand since the beginning of time."

New York Post

DECEMBER 29, 1948

'Don't Listen, Ladies' An Unhappy Visitor

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Although he cut an extremely dubious figure in the late war, there is no escaping the fact that Sacha Guitry is a monstrously clever fellow. His playful, skeptical, gayly antic comedies are among the ornaments of the modern French theatre. There are a few moments when that comic roguishness of his appears pleasantly in "Don't Listen, Ladies," which opened at the Booth last night, but, on the whole, the evening is a dull and feeble one, which even the nostalgia of its old-fashioned sex farce cannot render enjoyable.

Here again is a French play which emerges unhappily in its English version and which I, for one, cannot tell whether to blame on M. Guitry, the original author, or the Stephen Powys who is set down in the program as the translator. There have been rumors, by the way, that the actual adapter was P. G. Wodehouse, but, if that is true, it was apparently decided that one writer with a questionable war reputation was enough for one routine comedy. Anyway, it is safe to say that "Don't Listen, Ladies" brings no glory to either playwright or translator.

London Parisians

It seems to me that there is something innocent and gently heart-warming, in the tradition of lavender and old lace, about these familiar sex comedies dealing with middle-aged Parisians, who had been great lovers in their younger days, and are entangled with a couple of their ex-wives and a former sweetheart or two. Something is added to the joke when the debonair French are played by stalwart British actors with their best West End accents. But neither virtue is enough to help the present unfortunate offering for long.

Most of these presumably sophisticated pranks have a core of shameless sentimentality, and the translated Guitry play is certainly no exception. It makes a brave pretense of being scornful and superior about the wiles of women in pursuit of their mates, but, although it tries to laugh it off to the end, it gets just as romantic about its various heroines and their essential virtue as any other sentimental love story. The only trouble is that the sentimentality seems a little bit more idiotic than usual.

Old Routine

In a changing, chaotic world it would be quite a pleasure to see one of these regulation sex comedies of the old school, in which you could call every development well in advance, provided there were just enough freshness or charm to it. But, save for a few moments when Jack Buchanan, the star and co-producer, is chatting with the audience and a moment or two of amusing observation, everything is so tedious and desultory that the joys of nostalgia are soon dissolved. This is not the prewar Guitry some of us remember.

Mr. Buchanan is a pleasant music-hall comedian, and his playing of the leading role is lively and agreeable, even though it seems a shame that he doesn't go into a song from time to time. And he is certainly a Piccadilly Frenchman. Hugh Miller as a vague baron and Ian Lubbock as a lovelorn juvenile are helpful, and so is Ivy St. Helier as an ex-playgirl, who had been painted by Toulouse-Lautrec. Adele Dixon and Moira Lister are energetic as the hero's wives. "Don't Listen, Ladies" is hardly a happy London visitor.

Journal American

DECEMBER 29, 1948

Ho-Hum! Here 'Tis: That Nice Little Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

Here's that nice little play about which you've all been asking. No knockout. No "Streetcar Named Desire" with suffering, sex and a prize from Mr. Pulitzer. No washout, either. No "Grandma's Diary," with nothing but its closing to recommend it. Just a nice little play with a nice little plot and a nice little setting in which to play it.

And a nice little cast composed of nine Englishers who thereby add themselves to Broadway's actors - across - the - sea invasion. At their head is Jack Buchanan, the acting-singing - dancing Englishman who has come our way before in "Between the Devil," "Wake Up and Dream" and "Charlot's Revue." He who played "Harvey" with a deluxe London accent.

You've all been asking why we can't have more of these nice little plays? Why does every Broadway success have to be a knockout? Why isn't there an audience for a mild, well-mannered little comedy? Especially when that mild, well-mannered little comedy is in the hands of mild, well-mannered Englishers with clothes from Therese and Anderson and Shepherd?

Frankly, I wouldn't know the answers to your questions. But I do know that "Don't Listen, Ladies" is the nice little play about which you've all been talking. And you're welcome to it!

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The "Don't Listen, Ladies" of the title stems from the fact that Daniel Bachelet, the twice married bachelor who is the hero, has the habit of talking to the audience when no one else is on the stage to talk to. This, of course, is a nice little idea. But scarcely new. An unmarried bachelor named Hamlet beat him to it. And with better chosen words.

At any rate, M. Bachelet, who deals with antique furniture and modern women in la belle Paree, can't live with women or without them. Having divorced his first wife Valentine, he has taken Madeleine as his second. But Daniel and Madeleine don't get along, either. Something has come between them. Sacha Guitry, the playwright, I wouldn't be surprised!

So, all evening at the Booth, it's on again, off again, gone again with one of the two Madame Bachelets. And, now and then, a Julie Bille-en-Bois who, having once been painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, is willing to sell the original for a couple or three million francs. She, I must confess, I like better than the others. So, I think, does he . . .

And, although I remained with "Don't Listen, Ladies" until the very end, I can't remember which of the three ladies finally won the heart and hand of Mr. Buchanan pretending to be M. Bachelet.

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This nice little play about which you've all been asking is nicely acted by the invading Englanders. Under the direction of Willard Stoker, against the background of Leon Davey, in the adaptation of Stephen Powys, the thoroughly Sacha Guitry comedy is constantly at sexes and sevens about M. Bachelet and his warm and worried women.

In the middle of the story, frequently in the middle of the stage, Jack Buchanan is mild and well-mannered as the twice married bachelor. In flawless Anderson and Shepherd attire and Shaftesbury Avenue English, he is as fine and Frenchified as an Englishman can be. So polished are his dirty digs at women that no female of the playgoing species seems to mind.

And his fellow Broadway invaders are as mild and well-mannered as he. Moira Lister, making her American debut as Madeleine, Ivy St. Helier, making her American debut as Julie, and Adele Dixon, making her second American appearance as Valentine, are as attractive as can be in Amies, Therese and Rahvis gowns. Particularly Miss Lister. She's an eyeful . . .

So here's that nice little play about which you've all been asking. Judged as a nice little play, there's nothing wrong about it. Except, to borrow one of its own phrases, it's as repetitious as a traffic light. And just about as sexy.

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 29, 1948

'Don't Listen, Ladies' Is Amusing, But Dated

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Though Stephen Powys has done a graceful translation of a Sacha Guitry farce called in English "Don't Listen, Ladies," a Sacha Guitry farce does seem a little dated at the end of 1948. The play attempts to explore the whys and wherefores of the human mating instinct cleverly and amusingly. And it sometimes succeeds.

It is concerned with an aging Parisian antique dealer about to lose a pretty second wife, 24 years his junior, because of a stupidly misplaced love letter. He then calls in his ex-wife to prove that it was a hold-over from the past. The ex-wife proceeds to drive a wedge between the angry pair with a malicious hammer, in the hope of moving back into her former position.

The ex-wife's scheme falls, and the warring lovers are re-united happily and at least temporarily, for in Guitry's blase little world such things are hardly permanent.

In this comedy trifle, Guitry has but re-stated what Shaw stated more brilliantly in "Man and Superman," and Barrie more charmingly in "What Every Woman Knows": that the female of the species throughout nature is more deadly, determined and dominating than the male. Maeterlinck and Fabre advanced the same thesis in their more authentic biological studies.

Lee Ephraim and Jack Buchanan, who brought "Don't Listen, Ladies" over from England, and installed it last evening in the Booth Theatre, have given the frail piece a delightful production. The cast is superlative. Its members are masters at whisking glittering bubbles of nonsense through the air.

Producer Buchanan, is the art dealer; Moira Lister and Adele Dixon, as the wife and ex-wife, form one of the most ingratiating triangles to distinguish a stage in the past few seasons.

They etch their roles with such captivating style and buoyant suavity as to make it doubly difficult for a reviewer to turn thumbs down on their too skimpy vehicle. Buchanan's polished skill in the use of that antique device, the aside, proves something to cheer. As for the Misses Lister and Dixon, they are bewitching.

Ivy St. Helier scores a personal triumph as a faded queen of the boulevards, who became somewhat immortal and more than a little wealthy in her declining years as a result of having posed for Toulouse-Lautrec. Salutes also are due Ian Lubbock, Hugh Miller and Austin Trevor.

The direction by Willard Stoker and setting by Leon Davey also merit citations.

"Don't Listen, Ladies," in sum, thanks to first-rate interpreters, has a quota of diverting moments, but they are interspersed at infrequent intervals in a superficial, vintage script.

***NEW YORK* STAR**

DECEMBER 30, 1948

by John Lardner

Old Guitry Hat via Piccadilly

A troupe of wholesome British actors disguised as Frenchmen moved into the Booth Tuesday night and began playing a Sacha Guitry domestic-relations comedy in accents ranging from Mayfair to Cheapside by way of Johannesburg. To my way of thinking, they demonstrated that a Guitry domestic-relations comedy is no worse in British than it is in French or American—and no better, either.

Still, it is a picturesque sort of effect that Jack Buchanan and his company give in this Empire interpretation of Paris sex life, which goes by the name of *Don't Listen, Ladies* and was translated from the very routine French of M. Guitry by Stephen Powys. The roué is a London dandy, the French servant is a British parlor-maid, and the porter who lugs trunks on and off the stage, in telling an old railroad story, makes it sound as though it happened on the London-Edinburgh express, though he claims it happened on the Blue Train.

* * *

As a matter of fact, it has happened everywhere, and for a long, long time, like most of the other jokes in the play. You know the story I mean: the engineer on the Blue Train has a wife in Paris and a wife on the Riviera, and he's careful to call them both Fifi, because he talks in his sleep.

That is about the strength and speed of the marital humor in *Don't Listen, Ladies*. The character's accent, and his station in life, make no difference. At high levels and low, the epigrams are international and aged-in-the-wood. Have a couple of more samples:

"Let bygones be has-beens."

"I dislike her as much as if we'd known each other forever."

Mr. Buchanan, of course, gives off a matchless polish and shine in everything he does. As the saying goes—and if it doesn't go this way, it might just as well—you could eat your lunch off his shirt-front. You could shave in the reflection of his shoes. He is tall, suave, graceful, and easy, and if he looks and talks like no Parisian antique dealer you ever saw, that's irrelevant and immaterial, because the antique dealer is a phony to begin with.

Lounging or striding among his priceless terra cotta figurines and his 18th-Century *escritoires*, absent-mindedly spotting genuine Toulouse-Lautrecs from ten feet away, this antiquary is ridden by the suspicion that his young wife—he himself is middle-aged, though dapper—has been unfaithful to him, or might easily be if she hasn't been. It seems she stayed away from home all night one night and could give no better excuse for it than to say she was stuck at the top of a ferris wheel when the wheel went out of order.

* * *

That is a thin story at best, as her husband points out, but it is no thinner than M. Guitry's. It's not so much that the playwright's situations are old—it's the old, hollow, juiceless way he treats them that makes you wonder why, unless he was badly pressed for cash, he bothered to write this play at all. Like many others of its kind, *Don't Listen, Ladies* is even a little ludicrous in its combination of a cynical, sophisticated tone and a naive happy ending. There's a plot device near the end of it, involving a bottle of perfume which the husband treasures to show his true love for his wife, which is mawkish enough for the Saturday Evening Post or Culver City, Calif.

Mr. Buchanan (co-producer as well as star) is supported with stanch British loyalty in his Paris adventures by two very handsome ladies, Moira Lister and Adele Dixon, and by Hugh Miller, Austin Trevor, Ivy St. Helier, and Ian Lubbock, among others. The play's title is explained in a coy aside to the audience by Mr. Buchanan, in which he suggests to feminine spectators that the play traduces the honor of their sex. If it traduces anything at all, it's the ability of M. Guitry to keep up with the world around him.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 29, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Sly Gallic Comedy

SACHA GUITRY'S impudent farce about marriage, "Don't Listen, Ladies," has brought the polished Jack Buchanan and a knowing British company to the Booth Theater. In the Stephen Powys translation, they make the most of an avalanche of epigrams and a few slight dramatic situations. As Guitry did originally in Paris, and Francis Lister is currently doing in London, the star and co-producer takes the audience into his confidence in an opening soliloquoy, deploring the wiles the artifices of women in general, and those of his second wife in particular. From that point on, the offering is a catch-as-catch-can concoction, depending more on individual acting feats by Buchanan, Ivy St. Helier, Adele Dixon and Austin Trevor than a random comedy of manners and morals.

Buchanan, who will be remembered by more of us as a song and dance man than a farceur, is smoothly assured in the part of an errant husband who suspects his young wife of infidelity. With the particular assistance of Miss St. Helier, he succeeds in wresting laughter from the Guitry witticisms on more than one occasion. Meanwhile, he and Lee Ephraim have given their production appropriate accoutrements to accompany a sly Gallic conversation piece. A Leon Davey setting allows members of the company to enter and exit at will, while everyone wears the proper clothes to go with their bon mots. Much of "Don't Listen Ladies" is gay and colorful, but there is not much of a play at hand.

What there is of it concerns the tribulations of a wealthy antique dealer, whose first wife moves in on him when his second leaves, after having found a hidden love letter from Leda to her swain. Skating over a thin ice of innuendo, Guitry has used this none too exciting complication to deliver a series of comments on the unending war between the sexes. They are at their best when a former mistress of the husband brings him a Toulouse-Lautrec portrait of herself and informs him about the various formulas employed by women to confuse the male of the species. Miss St. Helier is utterly beguiling in the role. She gives a rich score of humor to a piece which needs it.

Moira Lister plays the wife with a calculated coquettishness which is exactly right. Her final reconciliation with the antique dealer, after having made him jealous by picking up a pompous millionaire is foreordained, but it results in a pleasant duet to the audience by Buchanan and herself. Miss Dixon is attractive and predatory as the first wife and Hugh Miller, Ian Lubbock and Bartlett Mullins contribute fragments of fun to the proceedings. Guitry has had a sharp tongue in several scenes of his comedy, but he has failed to give it much structure or even farcical meaning. Applause for "Don't Listen, Ladies" belongs to Buchanan and his able assistants.

The Sun

DECEMBER 29, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

No Favors From Piccadilly.

A comedy written by a Frenchman (Sacha Guitry), translated by an Englishman (or possibly two of them), produced successfully in London, and now sent to New York with another company of British players—such is the case history of "Don't Listen, Ladies," which took over the stage of the Booth Theater last evening. I feel that it's all in error.

"Don't Listen, Ladies" is old-fashioned to the point of including a cuckoo clock, which goes back to Paul M. Potter's day. It's all about a virtuous young wife who gets stuck all night on a ferris wheel when the mechanism breaks down and is suspected of infidelity by her middle-aged husband, a dealer in antiques. She walks out there is talk of divorce, wife No. 1 comes into the proceedings, and there are general complications before No. 2 returns—to stay. General bliss prevails at 10:40 P. M.

The Booth's new comedy, as my playgoing companion of last night decided, is a period piece. A hollow, empty, creaky and childish concoction. Perhaps Noel Coward could have written it better. In fact, he has written it better. And when English actresses appear in his plays, speaking his dialogue, they seem less aggressive than Moira Lister and Adele Dixon appear to be in "Don't Listen, Ladies."

Jack Buchanan returns to Broadway as the principal player in the imported comedy, and it's always pleasant to have him around. He's casual, easy, likable and expert in his new performance and is never quite overpowered by the goings-on upon the stage of the Booth. Ivy St. Heller brings a vaudeville-like gusto to her scenes, and there are amusing bits from Austin Trevor, Bartlett Mullins and Hugh Miller.

The playbill lists one Stephen Powys as the man making the translation from the Guitry original, but I suspect that Guy Bolton and his old playwriting crony, P. G. Wodehouse, were contributors. "Dont Listen. Ladies" is apparently a hearty hit in London. In New York, at the intersection of Forty-fifth street and Shubert Alley, it's a disjointed and sketchy little comedy, trifling and dated.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 29, 1948

Sacha Guitry's 'Don't Listen, Ladies' Put On in an English Translation by London Actors

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although love is generally reputed to be an interesting topic, you would never suspect it from Sacha Guitry's "Don't Listen, Ladies," which was exposed to the public at the Booth last evening. Since M. Guitry is fast maturing now, it is probably not astonishing that he has nothing vital to contribute to a subject that other Frenchmen have paid attention to in the past. One has to stop making amorous gestures sooner or later.

The astonishing thing is that a London company has taken the trouble to rush to New York with M. Guitry's jejune discursion. Jack Buchanan, remembered here for his festive performance in "Charlot's Revue," to say nothing of many subsequent gaieties, has crossed the Atlantic to play a fashionable boulevard philosopher of passion in a morning coat. Possibly he is beginning to feel the austerity. He cannot have much feeling about the play.

* * *

Since Sunday we have sat down in the theatre to three plays from France. Sartre's "The Victors" is in a rage about the horrors of the war. Giraudoux's "The Madwoman of Chaillot" has something of a rare grace to say about the invincibility of the pure in heart. There could hardly be a more inauspicious moment for M. Guitry's stale fiddle-faddle about the battle of the sexes. With a jaunty gesture—gallant though creaking—he discusses the torture of a husband who suspects his wife of infidelity, and a wife who suspects her husband of infidelity.

There are some very fine French antiques mixed up in this somewhere, as well as a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec. A broken-down courtesan offers a few professional rules for coquetry—very valuable. A porter offers a few maxims about women drawn from his experience—very elevating. In conclusion, M. Guitry remarks that he knows nothing about women and seems to have no hope that men and women will ever live happily together. Honest though his attitude is, it seems to pull the rug from under his play.

* * *

Unless Stephen Powys got hold of the wrong script, the translation is blameless. And don't say that "Don't Listen Ladies" would be shining with urbanity and insouciance if M. Guitry were playing it himself. For Mr. Buchanan is as insouciant as necessary in the leading part, and the other men and women are all right too. After all, they didn't write their own lines.

Rather than jeopardize the effectiveness of the Marshall Plan, this column respectfully refrains from criticizing this study of French manners. But Ira Katzenberg, a faithful and bald-headed first-nighter who invariably sits in the first row, did have a minor complaint. "Say, there's an awful draft coming off the stage when the curtain is up," he remarked patiently. "Keeps right on coming, too."

"The Madwoman of Chaillot"

The Sun

DECEMBER 28, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Scanty Philosophical Comedy.

"The Madwoman of Chaillot," a gusty and scanty philosophical comedy, thickly populated with Equity members, was put on at the Belasco last evening by Alfred de Liagre Jr., who brought over the scenery and costumes from the Parisian production. He also introduces the London actress, Martita Hunt, now making her New York stage debut.

Jean Giraudoux's "The Madwoman of Chaillot," adapted by Maurice Valency is Gallic in content and it is a play of considerable social comment. It is crowded with whimsy and atmospheric detail and offers engaging moments here and there, but it is slow in starting, lags in the middle, and is rather flat in its finish. The characters are frequently given to long, irrelevant and tedious discourses. To this inhospitable observer, a renowned Parisian success is sharply disappointing in its American presentation.

The so-called Madwoman isn't exactly demented, but she can be occasionally dull. She is a raffish old girl, a battered and eccentric countess, who mingles with the riff-raff of the Paris streets and makes friends of the rag-pickers and the deaf-mute, the hawkers and the jugglers, the vagabonds and the streetsingers. She comes upon a plan for the saving of humanity by the destruction of avarice, by the extermination of the Wicked People. And when she sends the city's knaves and rogues marching to oblivion through a secret door, there is again joy in the lives of the ragamuffins and the tatterdemalions; pigeons are flying and grass is growing once more in the Rue de Chaillot.

Martita Hunt, with pale face and flaming hair, given to outrageous geegaws and tawdry finery, looks the role of the Madwoman, beloved by the rabble. She is strident and elaborate in her playing, if not entirely successful in making a character of the outlandish countess. John Carradine is hammy and hearty as the lean and hard-visaged ragpicker. Estelle Winwood brings all of her flamboyance to the role of a secondary madwoman; she is shrill, showy and amusingly artificial. Nydia Westman chirrups entertainingly as the more virginal member of the sister act.

Clarence Derwent is unctious and expansive as a representative of the forces of destruction. Vladimir Sokoloff and LeRoi Operti are excellent as fellow rogues. There is a delightful performance from Leora Dana, new to Broadway, who spent the summer at Mrs. Hartwig's workshop at Ogunquit, Me. Miss Dana puts poignance and genuine feeling into her readings. Harold Grau, one of this corner's favorite actors, is around with very little to do.

Alfred de Liagre has directed the Belasco's new play skillfully, but the total effect of "The Madwoman of Chaillot" remains thus: A great deal of atmosphere, some exotic characters, excellent scenery, not much play.

"THE MADWOMAN OF CHAILLOT."

THE MADWOMAN OF CHAILLOT, a comedy in two acts, by Jean Giraudoux, as adapted from the French by Maurice Valency. Staged and produced by Alfred de Liagre Jr.; scenery and costumes designed by Christian Berard; music for Mazurka composed by Albert Hague and for "La Belle Polonaise," by Alexander Blass; lighting by Samuel Leve. At the Belasco Theatre.

The Waiter	Ralph Smiley
The Prospector	Vladimir Sokoloff
The President	Clarence Derwent
The Baron	Le Roi Operti
The Rag-picker	John Carradine
The Deaf Mute	Martin Kosleck
Irma	Leora Dana
The Broker	Jonathan Harris
The Street Juggler	John Rehan
Dr. Jadin	Sandra Giglio
Countess Aurelia	Martita Hunt
The Doorman	William Chambers
The Policeman	Ralph Roberts
Pierre	Alan Shayne
The Sergeant	Richard Sanders
The Sewer-Man	James Westerfield
Mme. Constance	Estelle Winwood
Mlle. Gabrielle	Nydia Westman
Mme. Josephine	Doris Rich

SYNOPSIS—Act I—The Cafe Terrace of Chez Francis. Act II—The Countess' Cellar—31 Rue de Chaillot.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 28, 1948

'Madwoman' Speaks In Too Same Accents

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is so much enchantment in "The Madwoman of Chaillot" that one wishes its entire present production were as witty, warm and wise, as fluid and fantastical as its best sequences.

This is a mature allegory told with such penetrating wit that one often wants to savor its comments, comic as they are, rather than laugh at them. Its basic theme is that people who value pure happiness and are innately generous are likely to be tagged as mad.

The leading figure is the Countess Aurelia, who lives physically in a Paris cellar, and mentally in the graciousness of the past.

The Countess' Day.

In a lovely speech she explains to an attempted suicide the excitement of her daily life. There is the game of choosing her wig and putting in her teeth, of tightening her corsets in which Lanvin has refused to put zippers, then decking herself with feathers, scarves and pearls. After that her day is spent watering flowers in the district, feeding the cats, and seeing that her acquaintances are all right.

One day she overhears a group of greedy businessmen who plan to ruin the Chaillot section of town because they have been told there is oil in the sewers. With imperturbable logic she convinces her friends that the men should be destroyed, and after a trial in absentia, she sends them eagerly down a passage into the sewers from which there is no return.

The actual story of "The Madwoman of Chaillot" is nothing in comparison to its telling. Aurelia and her closest friends exist in a world of fantasy which they can transport to most practical terms whenever there is occasion.

The Mirror Condemned.

She herself has security in these transitions that gives her superior grandeur. No matter how impractical her views may sound on the surface, there is in them always a subtle soundness that makes them entirely satisfactory for her own life.

Knowing she is old and ugly, she simply condemns her mirror as false, and forgets. Every day she reads the same old journal, a copy filled with pleasant scandal and the endlessly touching news of a friend's death. She remarks that everyone knows that as you continue to wear pearls they become real.

The transitory montage of reality and dreams spirals to moments of wild hilarity when Aurelia is visited by her friend Constance who brings along an imaginary dog. When Aurelia grows bored with fussing over the dog, Constance declares she never brought it in the first place, then reverses this decision as the mood and moment suit her.

The play has such a wonderful innocent expectancy that you accept it. It has the wild imaginative glamour that a children's pageant sometimes achieves, yet it never loses touch with elemental wisdom.

In this production, its two acts divide oddly into four sections of which the middle two are infinitely more effective. The opening cafe setting has physical charm and lightness, but the play has no rhythm or natural motion until Aurelia becomes the focus of attention.

In the second act's fantastic subterranean bedroom, the original meeting of the madwomen plays in a brilliant comic mood, while the trial and subsequent dispensation of the greedy men grows labored. Two plain reasons for this are that the leading actresses are more facile than the men, and that the staging leaves stilted the scenes with more than a few characters in them.

Martita Hunt brings high style to her American debut here as Aurelia. From her first wink at the cafe doorman, she is a warm human, whatever aberration may seize her later. Her long speech about her daily life is exquisitely casual and romantic. Through her many changing tempers there is always a contour to this madwoman which gives her sympathetic reality.

As Constance with the imaginary dog, Estelle Winwood is sharp-witted as ever, bustling and crotchety, and whipping the last ounce of humor out of her lines.

Daily Mirror

DECEMBER 28, 1948

'Madwoman of Chaillot' Is Perplexing, Tepid

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Madwoman of Chaillot" proved somewhat baffling to many in the first-night audience at the Belasco Theatre last evening, but it's really much simpler than it seems. It is nothing more than the philosophy of our own Thoreau, presented through a sur-realistic haze, by a clever Frenchman.

Jean Giraudoux, like Mahatma Gandhi, must have read the fiery New Englander. Like Thoreau, Giraudoux believes that corporations, middlemen and tax-collectors are evil things. He would much prefer an elementary society in which honest husbandmen wring their sustenance from a bountiful nature and acquire an occasional luxury or two via barter.

Unfortunately, man has thwarted Jefferson, Thoreau and Giraudoux by over-populating the earth. Thus he has complicated commerce, industry, finance and farming. And whether the playwright likes it or not, you will have your choice of complications in a somewhat free society or dictatorship in a slave state.

Giraudoux's Madwoman of Chaillot is appalled by the complexities of modern life in Paris. She develops a hatred for financiers, exploiters, promoters—and a great sympathy for little people. So, in scenes right out of Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass," she condemns the former to destruction by luring them, with promises of oil, into a bottomless whirlpool beneath the sewers of Paris.

Personally, we think Lindsay and Crouse depicted well-intentioned judgment and execution ever so much more effectively and amusingly in "Arsenic and Old Lace," of still fond memory. There are several brilliant passages in the Giraudoux script, but too much of its humor and satire fail to come across the footlights for a successful and satisfactory evening of theatre.

Those who saw the Giraudoux morality play in Paris returned enthusiastically to these shores. So we must suspect, perhaps unjustly, that Maurice Valency, in adapting it for the American stage, has lost much of the wit and sparkle that made it a boulevardier's delight. Anyway, the Belasco offers now but a tepid evening of perplexing naivete.

This, despite a magnificent performance by Martita Hunt, an English actress making her American stage debut in the title role. We trust that Miss Hunt will find a more rewarding vehicle the next time out. Appreciative salutes also are due John Carradine, Estelle Winwood, Vladimir Sokoloff, Clarence Derwent, Nydia Westman, Doris Rich, Leora Dana, Alan Shayne and James Westerfield.

This, despite wonderful sets and costumes by Christian Berard, and imaginative direction by producer Alfred de Liagre, Jr.

Simple people and too simple philosophy can be very noble—but also very dull.

Journal American

DECEMBER 28, 1948

A High-minded, Selfconscious Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

The customary good gray ghost of David Belasco was not the only disembodied spirit to haunt the historic playhouse on 44th Street in which the first New York showing of the Jean Giraudoux "Le Folle de Chaillot" was held last night by Alfred de Liagre Jr.

Somewhere on the premises was the spirit of Laurette Taylor, the dear departed great lady of the American theatre for whom this "The Madwoman of Chaillot" was intended. For she alone, I fancy, could have given its hazy Gaelic double-talk a meaning.

Martita Hunt did as well as could have been expected. But, in the current Englisher-on-Broadway fashion of Robert Morley, Joyce Redman, Ian Hunter, Adrianne Allen, Rex Harrison, Viola Keats, Cyril Richard, Isabel Jeans, Jack Buchanan, Adele Dixon, Moira Lister——

I mean that, following the example of the other Englanders now overacting in New York, Miss Hunt projects her Countess Aurelia, the eccentric of the title, with the robust heartiness her countrymen assume for their appearances and reappearances on Broadway.

The result is an extra confusion added to a confused and self-conscious allegory—satire, irony, apologue, parable, fable, what you will—that grows more confused and self-conscious as the evening wanes. Miss Hunt never gets beneath her madwoman's skin...

Now that Laurette Taylor can only do so in the spirit, perhaps no living English speaking actress could!

* * *

In an effort to report on what I find at the Belasco, I am here to tell you that "The Madwoman of Chaillot," in Maurice Valency's adaptation, is high-minded, unhurried and a long time getting ready for the Countess Aurelia's appearance in a Parisian cafe.

Preceding her arrival are a waiter, a little man, a prospector, a baron, a president, a street-singer, a flower-girl, a ragpicker, a deaf mute, a peddler, a juggler, a broker, three ladies known as Paulette, Therese and Irma, and a doctor known as Jadin.

Finally the daft darling of the Rue de Chaillot appears. She is followed by a sergeant, a sewerman, a doorman, a policeman and three rival madwomen from Passy, St. Sulpice and La Concorde. These, in turn, are followed by press agents, Adolphe Bertauts and the likes of them.

If, on paper, this is confused and self-conscious, it is a confusion and self-consciousness transmitted straight from the stage. But, being an allegory or something of the kind, I am sure that serious and significant things go on deep down beneath the surface.

Deep down in the Countess Aurelia's cellar, say, where the final act transpires. There, the queen of the madwomen has a secret trap-door leading into the sewers of her—and Victor Hugo's—not so gay Paree. Into those sewers go most of the cast. The trap door closes...

And the world we have made a mess of is ruled over by a madwoman—which might not be a bad idea!

* * *

Frankly, I do not understand this kind of play. Maybe, if I did understand "The Madwoman of Chaillot," I might—although quite timidly—advise you to go and see it. I am sure that my intellectual betters of the New York Drama Critics Circle will do so.

Even I can advise you to go and see several of its more obvious assets. And in the order named. The soaring settings designed by Christian Bernard from overseas and lighted with domestic admiration by Samuel Leve. These, and the costumes, are stunning sights to see.

The four-for-one and one-for-four performances of Martita Hunt, Estelle Winwood, Nydia Westman and Doris Rich when, at long last, they gang up and get themselves together. Even then, the dear departed Laurette Taylor would have improved them.

The deaf mute of Martin Kosleck, the president of Clarence Derwent, the baron of Le Roi Operti and the sewer-man of James Westerfield are less confused and self-conscious than some others. So are the minor madwomen of Miss Winwood, Miss Westman and Miss Rich.

But having read "The Madwoman of Chaillot" as "Le Folle de Chaillot," I can not write a rave review of its translated aspect at the Belasco. With the kindest intentions in the theatre world, I find it confused, self-conscious and more arty than Laurette Taylor would have permitted...

Frankly, I do not believe that the comfortless orchestra chairs at the Belasco are entirely to blame for my lack of enthusiasm.

New York Post

DECEMBER 28, 1948

'Madwoman of Chaillot' Is a Disappointment

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Something seems to have gone horribly wrong with the much-heralded Jean Giraudoux play, "The Madwoman of Chaillot," which Alfred de Liagre brought to the Belasco last night. Early post-war reports from Paris, where it was a great success, had hailed it as virtually a modern masterpiece, and the enthusiasm came from customarily reliable sources. All of us looked forward to it eagerly as a work that would offer refreshing qualities of vividness and imagination. Now one can only wonder what happened to it.

The late M. Giraudoux was a playwright of ideas and intelligence, and, even in a dull and murky performance, there are signs of the expected imaginative freshness in "The Madwoman." A gayly fantastic and evocative parable about how the honest vagabonds and decent derelicts of Paris, led by a half-crazy old lady, got rid of the greedy and the exploiters by luring them into the sewers under the city, it is a kind of distaff Pied Piper, filled with engaging potentialities. But the potentialities end in obscuring dullness.

Since the reports from France were so impressive and the most successful features of the local production are the sets and costumes from the original Paris presentation, it is difficult not to turn to the American adaptation for the trouble. Maurice Valency, who made the free translation, may be entirely guiltless, so far as I know, but his text is suspiciously flat and lacking in theatrical effectiveness. Somehow I could not resist feeling that things might have been better had the adaptation been turned over to William Saroyan.

Assuredly the play is filled with things which seem on the verge of being delightful. Its four ancient crones who symbolize the iron hand of justice for the wicked, its eloquent ragpicker, its enigmatic boss of the sewers, its juggler, deaf-mute and simple-minded policeman, even its fantastic scoundrels who are ready to blow up Paris because they are convinced by a madman that there is untold wealth in oil underneath it—all of them represent hints of a fine, wild imagination that is somehow never triumphant.

Instead, there is a curious, creeping dullness that begins early in the course of the fantasy and grows increasingly overpowering as it goes along. In the second of its two acts, Doris Rich, who should be remembered for her friendly chatelaine of a dubious house in last season's "Strange Bedfellows," gives it momentary vitality as one of the symbols of justice, while, upon occasion, Estelle Winwood as another of the beldames, John Carradine as the ragpicker, and Vladimir Sokoloff as one of the villains enliven things for a moment or two, but not for much longer.

In the title role, Martita Hunt, who attracted favorable attention in the recent British film version of "Great Expectations," is picturesque, but I thought her rather too monotonous. It may be unfair to her to recall that the great Laurette Taylor was once proposed for the part. Anyway, I doubt that the blame is Miss Hunt's. All that it is safe to say is that a play which promised—and promises—so much turns out to be dull and undistinguished, and the resulting disappointment is tremendous.

NEW YORK STAR

DECEMBER 29, 1948

by John Lardner

Of Tycoons and Madwomen

A stage fantasy that is sometimes gay and trenchant, sometimes as blindly fond of the sound of its own voice as a philosophical barfly, went into business Monday night at the Belasco, where I hope it will continue to expose Broadway for a decent length of time to its rare and un-Broadwaylike virtues. As for its vices—well, Broadway has taken the bad with the good for so long that it ought to have a digestion equal to the mixture of parts in the new show.

The new show is *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, by the late Jean Giraudoux, adapted for this occasion by Maurice Valency, associate professor of comparative literature at Columbia and part-time playwright. It contains two or three of the funniest scenes in town. Pictorially, it's a fine thing in every way. It is also a highly sedentary entertainment, after the French fashion, which asks you to sit in one position with both ears wide open a little too long for the local taste. But perhaps the local taste has been sufficiently riddled by gunshots and boudoir steeplechases to be ready for a change. If so, I think you will enjoy yourself for a good proportion of the two and a half hours it takes *The Madwoman of Chaillot* to pass the reviewing stand.

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M. Giraudoux's play is the stuff that dreams are made on, the dreams of a good-humored, intelligent dreamer with wit and a social conscience. His madwoman of the Chaillot quarter of Paris—a gentle lady of birth who stopped following life very closely in the year 1904—is suddenly stimulated by her poor friends and neighbors to identify all the evils of the world with big business. Being mad, she attacks problems far more rationally and directly than sane people do. She immediately exterminates these evils at one blow by imprisoning them in a bottomless pit deep below the sewers of Paris.

I have always been partial to French burlesques of high finance. The tycoons in *The Madwoman of Chaillot* are well up to standard—elemental and droll, with their machine-gun conversation, their floppy clothes, their gold bricks, their grand and nonchalant conceptions of larceny. Led by Clarence Derwent, as a president of the board of directors, any board directors; by Le Roi Operti, as an incredibly rakish dummy director with a title; and by Vladimir Sokoloff, as a "prospector," or idea man, who wants to tear Paris down and drill for oil through its ruins, M. Giraudoux presents a collection of business giants who quite understandably fill the madwoman with horror and grim purpose the moment she lays eyes on them.

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Her triumph occurs in the second act. It is also the triumph of Martita Hunt, the English actress who plays the title role, and of Alfred de Liagre Jr., director, and Christian Berard, designer. From a bed hung with crimson curtains in her room in the cellar of 21 Rue de Chaillot, a grotesquely handsome room strewn with period furnishings and packing-cases, Miss Hunt confers with three friends—the madwomen of Passy, St. Sulpice, and La Concorde—on the downfall of high finance. As a sop to law and custom, she allows the financiers to be tried for their crimes, *in absentia*, by her friends, the ragpickers, waitresses, deaf mutes, and peddlers of the neighborhood. She then sends them, madly but gently, to their doom. They think there is oil down there in that bottomless pit whose secret she has learned from her ally, the king of the sewer-men.

The convention of madwomen which opens the last act is as comic and moving as such a thing can well be. Each lunatic—these parts are played richly and delicately by Estelle Winwood, Nydia Westman, and Doris Rich, along with Miss Hunt—has her own degree of madness, and alternately scolds and humors the lunacy of the others. They make it clear, in passing, that nothing could be more logical than for ladies of refinement who stopped thinking years ago to associate the world's woes with the coarse, glib businessmen of modern times. They make it clear also that they are blind to any connection between these phenomena and themselves and the way of life which produced them.

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The author would probably have needed at least six hours of theater time to make good sense of all the notions and sub-notions with which he congested his story. I would need the same time to mention them all. I doubt if that's necessary, any more than it was necessary for M. Giraudoux to try to cover such a scattering of ground in one play. The play suffers from it, from diffuseness, complexity, and plain garrulity. But it has its points, and very unusual points they are in today's Broadway climate.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 28, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Let's admit in the first place that Jean Giraudoux's "The Madwoman of Chaillot" is too long for the slight fable it has to tell. After a rapturously humorous and poetic first act, the second act grows increasingly languid, and obviously that is a fault in playmaking. But a sluggish last act is a small price to pay for the wit and whimsical loveliness of a wise fantasy by a man who had dreamed of an impossibly noble life and who criticized it with grace and compassion like a thoroughly civilized writer.

M. Giraudoux is dead, but the luster of a fine mind still shines in this original fantasy, which has been admirably adapted by Maurice Valency. Alfred de Liagre Jr. deserves a word of thanks for appreciating the quality of Giraudoux's work and for having the courage to install it on Broadway.

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As a matter of fact, the madwoman of Chaillot is only a whack. Living happily in memories of a cozy past, she does not realize that the world has changed for the worse until her friends—waiters, ragmen and peddlers—tell her so. "Little by little the pimps have taken over the world," says a philosopher of the ash cans. He refers to the people who are greedy. "Men publicly worship the golden calf," she says in horror. Although the Chaillot woman is obviously a mental case she also knows the only thing that matters, which is that love is the one decent motive for living. With the assistance of Giraudoux's magic-wand, she rids the world of its parasites, and then everyone is happy.

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This is the sort of impish salute to the pure in heart that Saroyan once wrote in "My Heart's in the Highlands." From Giraudoux's mind it comes with equal devotion but with greater sophistication. For he knew that his dream could never come true and that it could be expressed only in a worldly fable with a touch of "Alice in Wonderland" in the writing. An accomplished writer with a free mind, he told it enchantingly—part whimsey, part parable, lighthearted in style but sombre in thought. Someone is not sturdy enough to keep the improvisation running freely all through the evening. But perhaps it is the audience and not the author who is at fault here. For the quality of "The Mad-woman of Chaillot is priceless—pure gold with no base metal.

Having recognized the quality of the literary work, Mr. de Liagre has had the wisdom to import Christian Berard's airy and imaginative scenery and his humorously blousey costumes for the demented old crones who speak the sanest lines in the play. M. Berard's touch is as light and fanciful as Giraudoux's. Samuel Leve has lighted the production with the appreciation of an artist.

Under Mr. de Liagre's direction, the performance is not all of one piece yet, for it needs to be lived in by the actors for another week or two. Since the play is a poem the performance must be a dance. But the individual acting is nearly all superb. And Martita Hunt's kindly and droll portrait of the leading character is rich in a sort of raffish humanity—very imperious in style, very friendly in manner. As the mad woman of Passy, Estelle Winwood is incomparably fantastic and contributes a very notable piece of original acting.

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The cast is a long one, but never dull or perfunctary. Vladimir Sokoloff, as a plunderer of the world on a grand scale, and Clarence Derwent, as a notable charlatan, give vastly enjoyable performances. John Carradine is excellent as a ruminative rag-picker; he has the grace to understand the part and the ability to act it lucidly. There is one especially lyric scene by Leora Dana as a romantic waitress. Sandro Giglio, Nydia Westman, Doris Rich, Le Roi Operti, James Westerfield and others weave interesting figures on the luminous screen of Giraudoux's poetic fable.

Probably "The Madwoman of Chaillot" ought to be rehearsed by a company of well-blended geniuses for a year before the curtain is raised for the public. But our theatre is not organized for such heroic enterprises. What we have is not perfect. But it is original, inspired and high-minded, and also a creative work of art. Now we know how much light went out of the world when Jean Giraudoux died.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 28, 1948

'Madwoman' a Provocative Play In Which Miss Hunt Is Wonderful

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Any venturesome playgoer in search of something special instead of a standard brand should be happy in the Belasco Theatre, where, last evening, Alfred de Liagre Jr. presented Maurice Valency's adaption of "The Madwoman of Chaillot," by the late Jean Giraudoux.

Here on 44th St. the playgoer will find a comic fantasy which has sense and purpose, as well as wit; and, if he has the slightest fondness for and understanding of actors, he will take great delight in the performance of London's Martita Hunt in the title role.

I think the playgoer should bear in mind that the French are extremely talkative. They spend hours gabbling at their quaint sidewalk cafes. They are almost as fond of listening as they are of talking, and when they go to a play they are willing to give a dramatist all the time he needs to say what he wants to say. Bearing this in mind, one should allow the late Giraudoux more leeway than would be given a standard brand of Broadway author.

Simple Solution.

"The Madwoman of Chaillot" is nothing less than a simple rearrangement of human affairs, by a picturesque form of murder, so that everybody can be happy once again. Money is universally recognized as the root of all evil, so all Giraudoux had to do was to arrange for Miss Hunt to liquidate people who sell things, buy things and steal things. When all those who are motivated by an urge for profit are eliminated it is an easy matter for those who are left—ragpickers, deaf mutes, daffy women, waitresses, peddlers and cops—to be happy.

Miss Hunt, the madwoman of the Chaillot district in Paris, is just the one to fix things up. Her form of insanity is that she likes people. She looks like and is a relic of a couple of generations ago, with her wigs, lorgnettes, feather boas and other fabulously messy finery. She is a countess and she inhabits the stone-walled basement at 21 Rue de Chaillot. She does take a nap in a bed there during a dream sequence of the play, but I suspect that when she really wants to sleep she retires upside down on the ceiling.

Her basement has a magical opening in the floor, in which there are stairs. The stairs don't go anywhere; they just go down and they keep on going down. All she has to do is invite her profit-hungry victims, who are looking for oil to take the stairs and that's that.

A Trio of Witches.

Giraudoux made "The Madwoman of Chaillot" a quite fascinating mixture of Shaw, another commentator on human foibles, and Carroll, the man who thought up Wonderland for Alice. His play looks cynically and humorously upon the many failings people have acquired, and it has some wonderfully batty scenes.

For instance, Estelle Winwood is just as crazy as Miss Hunt is, but in a different way. Miss Winwood is an old horror who comes visiting with a dead dog that isn't there. Miss Hunt and another friend, Nydia Westman (who always comes with a crowd of friends who aren't there either), politely humor Miss Winwood and pretend to like her dog because this makes her happy. But Estelle is smarter than they think. Sometimes she pretends to bring the invisible dog but doesn't, and her friends make fools of themselves petting it when it isn't there at all.

Mr. de Liagre has kept the performances as succinct as possible, I guess. In a large company of rogues and deserving people John Carradine, Vladimir Sokoloff, Clarence Derwent, James Westerfield and Doris Rich are outstanding. And Mesdames Hunt, Winwood and Westman are completely funny. "The Madwoman of Chaillot" will be more interesting to talk about than anything else this season.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 28, 1948

= *By* HOWARD BARNES =

Of Rare Theatrical Beauty

A FANTASY of vaulting imagination and rare theatrical beauty has opened at the Belasco. "The Madwoman of Chaillot" is Maurice Valency's adaptation of a play by the late Jean Giraudoux, which Louis Jouvet presented in Paris at the end of 1945. Alfred de Liegre jr. has produced and staged it here with a fine appreciation of its intrinsic poetry, philosophy, humor and sheer stage excitement. He has brought Martita Hunt from England to give an inspired portrayal of an aging and daft countess, who takes an afternoon off to set the world aright when she learns that it has been delivered into the hands of the wicked. The others in the company support her notably in a fascinating piece of dramatic irony, while the original Christian Berard settings and costumes are magnificent.

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Giraudoux picked a complicated concept for his work, which sometimes lacks clarity and cohesion. It has been his idea to parade the black-hatted pimps of the recent past in all the ugliness of their financial and social transactions, array them against the friendly poor citizens of Paris, for whom they do not even have a nod of greeting, and do away with them altogether in a wild scheme of the lady of the title. The action shifts somewhat abruptly from the Cafe Terrace of Chez Francis to the Countess's cellar apartment, where some wonderfully loony friends of hers listen to her plans for exterminating worshippers of the golden calf. The dialogue has too many long speeches for complete satisfaction. But the work swirls through two acts with the authority and magic of true theater.

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The men of ill-will, who get their come-uppance at the hands of the madwoman, are known as the presidents, the prospectors and the press agents. They decide to drill for oil under Paris itself to promote some devious stock market manipulations. The Countess lives in a remote world of approximately 1904, but when she hears that Parisian existence has come to such a sorry pass, she employs a bit of kerosene and a bottomless pit, which a jovial sewer-man informs her exists in her cellar, to trap the rats. Interwoven with the social commentary of the play are bits of pleasant romance and hilarious passages in which Estelle Winwood, Nydia Westman and Doris Rich appear with Miss Hunt with imaginary animals and friends and conduct a trial of the grafters.

Miss Hunt, who is making her first stage appearance here, was a superb choice for the madwoman. In get-ups of the early 1900s which defy description, she holds the production together at all times. Her madness is inspired. Her comic sense is unfailing. Miss Winwood gives her chief support in the final scenes, but there are a couple of dozen other performers on hand to give the play splendid farcical dimensions. Clarence Derwent and Vladimir Sokoloff are particularly good as the chief villains. John Carradine, as a rag-picker, and Martin Kosleck, as a deaf mute, give great impetus to the Rue Chaillot liquidation. Leora Dana and Alan Shayne play the love story quietly and James Westerfield has a striking bit as the sewer man. De Liagre has directed the proceedings with feeling and flavor. "The Madwoman of Chaillot" is in the high tradition of theatrical fantasy.

"Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!"

NEW YORK STAR

DECEMBER 28, 1948

by John Lardner

A Grim Night with Mr. Truex

Sunday night was a grim one at the John Golden Theatre, as stark and somber as any on the heath in *Macbeth*. You could tell from the dead-white, twisted faces of the people in the lobby, as they stood there between acts like damned souls on the lip of the pit, that a light farce comedy of the most lugubrious kind was taking place inside the shooting-gallery.

Inside, you could tell it even better. The source of the trouble was in plain view on the stage, in the shape of *Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!*, a play by Ronald Telfer and Pauline Jamerson in which Ernest Truex is displayed as a timid taxidermist from Great Britain who has come to America to make certain adjustments in his sex life at the suggestion of his psychoanalyst.

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To get the clinical details out of the way at the outset, and give you the plot right between the eyes, I need only add that his sex life up to this point has been one extended lacuna—as they say in sporting circles, he has never been to the post. American women will cure this condition in no time, according to the doctor (that shows you the kind of prestige that goes with ERP), and so the taxidermist goes straight from the boat to the country home of a playwright who is writing—here we get a touch of real life—a bad play. The playwright introduces the patient to three women. Involvements follow, and so does an uneasy movement of the audience toward the exits.

I have long been an admirer of Mr. Truex, not only for his outstanding comic talents but also for his agility. He has been in more bad farces than good ones (for the reason that more bad farces are written than good ones), but he is notably unscarred by his long and dangerous experience. He has always managed to jump a foot or two to the right or left just before a crumbling plot could fall upon him and break him in two.

Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook! is quite a test of his footwork; a surefire trap for actors, you would say offhand. Its first act is dull but also deceptively quiet. It is written straight, almost entirely without gags. When Mr. Truex walks onto the stage toward the end of it, however, he shows at once that he knows that the authors have evil intentions and that he is not being fooled. At the same time, in a most public-spirited way, he tips off the customers as to what is in store for them. Throwing the book out the window—it lands somewhere out of sight, with an unwholesome squashing sound—he begins to mug all over the place in self-defense.

The term "mug" is perhaps a crude one to apply to so gentle and honest a comedian as Mr. Truex, but the fact is that during the years of bitter campaigning he has come to possess more tricks than a barrel of marmosets. In the crisis that swiftly ensues, as the authors throw off their disguise and reveal that there is nothing on their minds but the most degraded, imitative, flat, and confused kind of farce plot, the star becomes more and more independent of his surroundings. I don't by any means say that his mugging makes *Oh, Meadowbrook!* good entertainment, but I can't help thinking that it shows his opinion of the play, and a very valid criticism it is.

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Treading the swamp with Mr. Truex, but much more heavily and hopelessly, is a company of waifs that includes Vicki Cummings, Harry Elkrbe, Sylvia Field, Grace McTarnahan, and Morton L. Stevens. The defense scheme of Miss Cummings, who plays the part of what she herself describes, probably from hearsay, as "a lusty girl," is to laugh heartily at everyone else's lines, as though she detected in them a secret, coded humor apparent to nobody else. The rest of the actors, uttering remarks like "by Godfrey!" and "You've had a night of dalliance under my roof," and "That's pretty fustian talk," just utter them and let it go at that.

'OH, MR. MEADOWBROOK!'

Comedy by Ronald Telfer and Pauline Jamerson; staged by Harry Elkrbe. Setting by Wolfgang Roth. Costumes by Lucille Little. Presented by John Yorke at the John Golden Theater, Sunday evening, December 28, 1948. The cast:

Constance Vyse.....Grace McTarnahan
Harland Vyse.....Harry Elkrbe
Sophie MacDonald.....Sylvia Field
Jasbet Meadowbrook.....Ernest Truex
Nesa Madrigals.....Vicki Cummings
James Howells.....Morton L. Stevens

SYNOPSIS: The action takes place in the Vyse living room in Connecticut. Act I. A Friday afternoon, in early summer. About 4 o'clock. Act II. The next afternoon, about 3:30 o'clock. Act III. Early the next morning.

The Sun

DECEMBER 27, 1948

'MR. MEADOWBROOK'

Ernest Truex over the years has treated Manhattan playgoers to some memorable and delightful performances. That being the case, it seems a shame today that he could not have side-stepped the little number called "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" which last evening reclaimed the John Golden Theater from the films.

The authors, Ronald Telfer and Pauline Jamerson, have obviously set out to demonstrate that a mild little middle-aged Britisher, who rather belatedly is learning some of the facts of life under the guidance of a psychiatrist, is dropped into the Connecticut home of a successful playwright at the same time with the playwright's ex-mistress, something sidesplitting and risque in the way of a comedy is bound to result. Having just sat through the three acts of "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" this onlooker is definitely skeptical, for the Telfer-Jamerson version is merely talky, implausible and dull, and the authors' strenuous efforts to liven up the evening with a lot of double entendre lines can hardly be filed under the classification of hilarity.

Truex, being an actor who long ago learned how to play meek little men on a stage, manages now and then to bring a touch of humor to a scene or a line. For the most part, however, despite the authenticity and skill of his performance, he is overwhelmed by the script. The same fate befalls the other players, including Vicki Cummings, who plays the playwright's old love. The one exception is Sylvia Field, who manages to make the woman from Scotland, who is temporarily serving as the cook for the playwright and his wife, a very real, and at moments touching, character.

According to the program, "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" is the forty-seventh play in which Truex has appeared. One can only hope that for his forty-eighth he will find something more worthy of his time and his talents.

HERRICK BROWN.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 27, 1948

'Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!'

Without Ernest Truex, the incident that occurred at the Golden Theatre last night under the label "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" would have made pretty grim reporting indeed. For what Ronald Telfer and Pauline Jamerson have fashioned is a rather witless joke on sex which at best is only mildly amusing and for the most part more than obvious.

Mr. Telfer and his collaborator have conjured up a timid Englishman who, upon the advice of his psychoanalyst sets out to discover love. For his adventure he journeys to America where it seems glamorous women abound, and from that point it hardly seems necessary to enter into the details of his experiences. Suffice it to say that the playwrights seize upon every possible double entendre, all the trit ecliches of the situation. Were it not for Mr. Truex the whole business could be really embarrassing.

But Mr. Truex is a very funny man and in "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" he has a rôle that is cut to his measure. As one of the theatre's ablest portrayers of the meek and mild he can rise above the banality of his lines with the lifting of the eyebrow, a diffident shake of the head. He can shrivel his frame in fear, clutch at pillars and hide behind flower vases so that you forget the tasteless situation into which he has been thrown. His sincere innocence almost prevails during an evening when heavy hands are at work.

There are also some capable performers on hand to aid Mr. Truex. Vicki Cummings is playing a brash representative of Broadway in her expert rough, earthy style. As a philatelist in search of an Afghanistan air mail stamp, Sylvia Field renders a pleasant performance with a nice dry touch. Morton L. Stevens, as a producer of plays, is effective in a brief role as are Grace McTarnahan and Harry Ellerbe, who doubled for the occasion as the director.

Wolfgang Roth's Connecticut living room is cheerfully spring-like and a reminder that the current diving temperatures are only transitory. In fact, come to think of it, "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" probably will be more at home along the strawhat trail.

L. F.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 27, 1948

'Mr. Meadowbrook' Cast Excels the Play

After its many tribulations on tour, "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" raised the curtain at the Golden Theater last night and had itself an undistinguished opening. It might have fared worse, but for ingratiating performances by Ernest Truex, Vicki Cummings and several others.

This farce, the work of Ronald Telfer and Pauline Jamerson, is a contrived little piece which ambles along familiar territory without ever becoming particularly funny. The plot is overburdened with boudoir innuendos and it is on a level with summer circuit stuff.

The play tells of a chaste Englishman (that's Mr. Truex), who visits his playwright-friend in a Connecticut home. The Britisher has come to America at the suggestion of his psychologist, who has advised him to sow his wild oats.

Complications and misunderstandings arise when Mr. Truex meets and becomes involved with (1) the playwright's wife, (2) the playwright's housekeeper, and (3) the playwright's former girl friend.

The evening's virtues narrowed down to a cast much superior to the play itself. As the morally pure Englishman, Mr. Truex's droll, soft, impish, wondering manner is pleasant comedy. It was a pity that his talents had little to supply them in this rather feeble offering. Vicki Cummings, who has both looks and assurance, lent excellent support to Mr. Truex's drolleries. And another actress, Sylvia Field (who is Mrs. Truex in real life) turned in a good performance as a Scottish housekeeper.

The one set designed and executed by Wolfgang Roth was adequate.

M. T.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 27, 1948

'Mr. Meadowbrook' a Sad Farce

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Sex is fun, but it is very, very difficult to write about so it will be funny. The authors of "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!"—Ronald Telfer and Pauline Jamerson by name—strove heroically last evening at the John Golden Theatre to make a saucy and witty farce about gentlemen actors and lady actresses, but their strivings were insufficient.

There are good comedians like Ernest Truex and Vicki Cummings in "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" and supporting players like Morton L. Stevens, Harry Ellerbe, Sylvia Field and Grace McTarnahan also are in there punching; but there just isn't enough gaiety in the play to keep one away from home after dinner.

This is a report written with utmost regret, for Mr. Truex is an able farceur whom one sees too seldom. It would be a fine thing if somebody, some time, wrote a comedy worthy of his great skill and his lovable presence. Mr. Telfer and Miss Jamerson weren't anywhere up to the job last evening.

The comedy casts Mr. Truex as an innocent English taxidermist who visits the Connecticut home of a playwright in a timid quest after dalliance. He is offered dalliance by a wife, a lady playwright and a housekeeper, and he is almost as terrified as I was. The entire affair is a misfortune.

Besides playing the playwright, Mr. Ellerbe has directed "Oh, Mr. Meadowbrook!" There are flashes of amusement, a good line here and there and some heroic work by Mr. Stevens to keep the comedy moving, but such scattered efforts can't make the play because the play just isn't there.